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**TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:
A NARRATIVE INQUIRY EXAMINING INSIGHTS FROM MIDDLE SCHOOL
TEACHERS**

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ABSTRACT

Throughout their careers, teachers seek professional growth opportunities to continually improve their craft. This quest has resulted in various learning experiences for teachers that have impacted their practice in differing ways. Bayar (2014) writes that schools traditionally provide training for teachers, professional development (PD), to help in-service teachers grow as professionals. To gain further insight into the topic of teacher PD, this narrative inquiry sought to obtain a better understanding of PD based on teachers' perceptions of their past PD experiences and how those experiences impacted their professional practice. This study was guided by a central question and sub-questions. The central question asked how middle school teachers describe their experiences with professional development. Supporting sub-questions probed further by seeking to know how experiences with PD led to teachers making changes in their classroom. The participants in this study included seven middle school teachers from one upper Midwestern rural district who had more than two years of experience in the school where the study took place. Multiple types of data gathering instruments were used including semi-structured interviews, reflective writing artifacts, and follow-up interviews. This study followed the data analysis spiral discussed by Creswell and Poth (2018). Four themes emerged from the data including the *relevancy of* PD, the importance of *time with colleagues*, opportunities for *collaboration*, and the importance of PD that is *personalized* to the unique learning needs of individual teachers. Findings from this study offer insights for school and district leaders to consider. Conclusions suggest that professional development that includes teacher choice increases the *relevancy* of PD for teachers, especially when training is specific to content and/or curriculum. Additional conclusions point to the importance of teachers having *time with colleagues* to learn, implement, and receive feedback on new learning, and the importance of PD which includes *personalized* training that supports teachers in meeting the needs of all students. This study suggests that the structure for planning PD may be improved by seeking the input of practicing teachers and asking them to provide their insights into what has been effective for them in the past.

Signed  _____

Dr. Kris Reed, Committee Chair

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Teachers commit their careers to the process of developing others and to the process of learning. Students are the beneficiaries of this commitment, but teachers themselves are continually seeking ways to develop their craft and to gain new knowledge. Teachers exemplify what it is to be lifelong learners, adjusting and improving their work each year and with each individual student. The need to be adaptable is inevitable in the education profession and therefore, staying apprised of innovative methods is crucial. Aside from seeking new learning on their own, teachers often rely on professional development (PD) opportunities to assist them in acquiring new knowledge that will translate to improvements in their teaching, thereby benefitting their students. Professional development for teachers has been defined as a wide variety of specialized training, formal education, or advanced professional learning intended to help administrators, teachers, and other educators improve their professional knowledge, competence, skill, and effectiveness (Ed Glossary, 2013).

The practice of providing PD to teachers has been prevalent in schools for many years, and this practice itself has evolved a great deal over time. Choy et al. (2006) discussed the limitations of traditional approaches to PD and how recent shifts in PD models provide teachers opportunities to learn together and work collaboratively. Rebore (2015) discussed traditional approaches, often known as teacher in-service training, where effectiveness was limited because such training represented changes being imposed on schools and teachers and that no real needs of the educational organization were being addressed. Rebore (2015) goes on to discuss more recent shifts in teacher learning, since the early 2000s, often center on the goal of producing effective instruction. One such evolution in teacher PD has been that of moving past providing

teachers with content knowledge to that of assisting in the development of teachers' identities as professionals. Marcelo (2009) described teacher professional development as a process that can happen either individually or collectively and is a culmination of formal and informal experiences within a school. Bayar (2014) writes that schools traditionally provide professional development to help in-service teachers grow as professionals. Throughout the evolution of teacher PD, improving student learning remains the ultimate goal.

PD should be the responsibility of those who supervise, resulting in administrators and district leaders striving to plan and facilitate effective PD for teachers (Glickman et al., 2010). Developing teachers as individual professionals as well as meeting school goals can pose a challenge for school and district leaders. Camburn (2015) discusses the importance of engaging teachers in the meaningful work of planning professional development suggesting that inserting this practice may have a higher likelihood of fostering changes that improve practice. Literature on PD both points out the flaws of past PD purposes as well as what is beneficial to the students of today. Lichtman (2017) suggests that gap between what K-12 schools need and what teachers are trained to do in our schools is enormous, yet can be filled. In response to this evidenced need, there exists literature that points to the need for providing teachers a long-term learner-centered structure that supports teachers as they work collaboratively to develop further knowledge (Borko et al., 2010).

Effective Professional Development

The importance of comprehensive and applicable professional development plans for teachers has been researched and discussed in recent studies. Soine and Lumpe (2014) sought to highlight the need for teachers to have access to professional development that is designed according to the principles of effective learning, which creates opportunities for teachers to take

control of their learning. Through surveys administered to 379 elementary teachers, Soine and Lumpe (2014) aimed to gather information on the effectiveness of PD through multiple indicators including engaged learning, duration of PD, focus on content knowledge, coherence with teachers' needs, and collective participation. Teachers encounter professional growth opportunities regularly, with students and/or colleagues, and it is through examining these authentic learning moments that applicable PD can be implemented so teachers can reflect on these moments (Soine & Lumpe, 2014).

It is common for district-planned training to fit the needs of the school or district, but not necessarily the needs of individual teachers, which, as previously mentioned in Soine and Lumpe's (2014) study, is a crucial component to examining and altering practice. Burke (2013) conducted a qualitative study including four school teachers and four university staff in which observations, reflections, questionnaires, and field notes were gathered to measure the effectiveness of having teachers experience professional development through the implementation of innovative, communicative instruction. The study determined that teachers who were provided more opportunities at their schools to understand and experience innovative methods were better able to carry these methods into practice (Burke, 2013).

Hardin and Koppenhaver (2016), in a mixed-methods study involving 267 teachers in grades 6-12, used surveys, and questionnaires to gather data on the effectiveness of a flipped PD model over a traditional approach. Traditional approaches are typically planned and delivered by the administration. In the flipped PD model within the Hardin and Koppenhaver study (2016), learners focused on content using a flexible pace and setting that met their needs and allowed for practice in a group setting. This was the opposite of a traditional approach that delivered information in a group setting and was practiced independently. As part of Hardin and

Koppenhaver's (2016) study, teachers identified the content that they needed to improve instruction. As part of the study protocols, teachers could choose to study at any time of the day in any location, and they could ask questions online and offer input to one another. Findings from the study indicate that teachers identified the flipped PD model to be an effective approach and that the approach provided a way for organizations to provide research-based instructional practices for teachers to adopt (Hardin & Koppenhaver, 2016).

According to Whitworth and Chiu (2015), PD that allows for personalized learning is impactful when it is systematic or done according to a methodical plan. Surette (2015) describes components of effective professional development that include traditional approaches such as workshops and conferences as well as non-traditional approaches such as mentoring, coaching, and peer observation. According to Surette (2015), effective PD is provided over an extended timeframe and involves teachers in the planning process.

There exists a need to examine how teacher PD meets current professional needs. Brian (2018) suggests that the obstacles teachers face in implementing their learning could be addressed by offering PD that is more flexible, more engaging, and that offers more choices of content. Teachers at all levels face challenges in planning and preparation, which may include planning to meet educational standards, or content standards for multiple grade levels of their students (Soto et al., 2018). With so many components comprising teacher and student success, it is often difficult for the administration or the district personnel to know of possible challenges each teacher is facing that may be impeding the productiveness of their instruction, the learning of their students, or the self-efficacy of the teachers themselves. Fox et al. (2015) discussed the importance of teachers being a "part of building their professional knowledge and knowing that they can engage in deeper connections between theory and practice" (p. 155). Allowing teachers

the opportunity to reflect on their practice regularly and over time creates a greater awareness of the practice, which can contribute to a redirection of action (Fox et al., 2015). Hardin and Koppenhaver (2016) also examined the application of PD in classrooms, discussing that professional development should engage teachers while they actively work to apply their learning in an applicable manner to their practice.

Teachers can take away very different information and strategies from a learning experience, depending on the knowledge they bring to the activity, as well as their proclivity and assessment of where they would like to improve (Minor et al., 2016). A topic still in need of research includes how effective professional development could meet the unique needs of teachers at the middle school level. Uncovering information about professional development from middle school teachers may shed light on the types of PD they see as the most impactful. To better meet teachers' needs, seeking their feedback about professional development becomes a critical component that warrants further exploration when planning and implementing professional development most effectively. This study sought to elicit teacher input to gain further insight into how teachers perceive and use PD and which traits of PD may be providing meaningful learning for in-service teachers.

Opportunity for Change

Professional development in Pk-12 schools continues to be financially supported and highly recommended. Macias (2017) discusses the evolving role of educators and states that it is essential for teachers to develop various skills through PD while Rose (2009) believes that teachers have various professional training needs that current PD programs may be failing to address. Given its importance, the effectiveness of PD and the role it plays in providing teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to impact student learning is in need of examination.

Teachers have individual and unique needs that may not be addressed in professional development, which makes it an important topic to study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to obtain a better understanding of professional development based on teachers' perceptions of their past professional development experiences and how those experiences impacted their professional practice. This study aimed to identify current teachers' perceptions of professional development based on their own unique experiences. Rose (2009) describes factors that influence the effectiveness of PD, which include timing, delivery, facilitators, and content. These factors identified by Rose (2009) were used to explore teachers' perceptions of professional development

Research Questions

The following central question was used to guide the research. How do middle school teachers describe their experiences with professional development?

Sub questions:

1. How do middle school teachers describe their experiences with professional development that led to changes in their classroom?
2. How do middle school teachers describe their experiences with professional development that met their needs as individual teachers?
3. How do middle school teachers describe their involvement in professional development?
4. How do middle school teachers describe the impact of professional development on their self-efficacy as teachers?

5. How do middle school teachers describe the impact of professional development on student success and academic growth?

Significance of the Study

Exploring middle school teachers' experiences with professional development may lead to identifying more effective professional development. This study is significant as it offers an opportunity for school leaders to gain an understanding of one school district's middle school teachers' perceptions of professional development. Because teachers continue to receive professional development that is often designed and delivered by the administration, there exists a need for understanding teachers' perspectives on professional development. Supporting the learning of the teachers, and providing opportunities for them to share their perspectives is beneficial. This study will add to the existing body of research on teacher professional development. It will serve to inform school and district leaders about teachers' perceptions of professional development in a rural middle school, which may lead to identifying more effective methods for delivering professional development.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined to ensure consistent understanding of these terms throughout the study.

Content area: refers to a defined domain of knowledge and skill in an academic program (Ed Glossary, 2014).

Educational standards: the learning goals that students should know and be able to do at each grade level (Common Core States Initiative, 2020).

Instructional strategies: techniques teachers use to deliver training. Instructional strategies should provide effective and productive learning (Literacy Basics, 2013).

Personalized learning: an educational approach that varies the learning objectives, instructional methods, content, and assessment methods based on the needs of the student, with the involvement of the student in selecting content and educational objectives (Virginia Department of Education, 2020).

Professional development: a wide variety of specialized training, formal education, or advanced professional learning intended to help administrators, teachers, and other educators improve their professional knowledge, competence, skill, and effectiveness (Ed Glossary, 2013).

Rural: a city, town, or unincorporated area that has a population of not more than 20,000 inhabitants (United States Department of Agriculture, 2019).

Teacher self-efficacy: teachers' beliefs in their ability to effectively handle the tasks, obligations, and challenges related to their professional activity, plays a key role in influencing important academic outcomes (e.g., students' achievement and motivation) and well-being in the working environment (Frontiers in Psychology, 2019)

Context of the Study

The study took place in a rural public school district within a small town in an upper Midwestern rural state. At the time of the study, the population of the town was 5,702 (US Census Bureau, 2019). Enrollment in the school district was 1,384 as of October 2017 (National Center for Education Statistics). At the time of the study, this district operated five separate buildings. Two buildings housed 521 Kindergarten through fourth-grade students, another building was reserved for 441 middle school students in grades 5 through 8, and two buildings housed 416 students in grades 9 through 12. Of the total school population, 43.8% of students were considered economically disadvantaged because their families met the income guidelines to

qualify for either free or reduced lunch (National Center for Education Statistics). This study took place with teachers in the district's middle school where 30 middle school certified teachers served between 400 and 500 students.

Background and Role of the Researcher

At the time of this study, the researcher served as the elementary principal and federal programs director for grades K through 4 in the district where the study took place. The researcher had been in the district for 12 years serving first as a middle school mathematics teacher and later as the director of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Throughout these roles and into the current role of a school leader, the researcher maintained excellent working relationships with the participants in this study. The researcher holds a Bachelor's Degree in Elementary Education and Vocal Music Education, a Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction with K-12 Math Specialization, and an Education Specialist Degree in PK-12 Administration. The researcher's professional interests related to this study included developing teachers' knowledge and skills as well as students. The researcher is a National Board Certified Teacher and had applied reflective practices during that process, which led to a desire by the researcher for all educators to have the opportunity to grow and to reach their potential as professionals. As a teacher, having the tools necessary to meet the needs of students is directly connected to the investment put into building that skill set as educators. The researcher's past role as the director of curriculum, instruction, and assessment caused an eagerness and interest in expanding the training and development offerings made available to teachers. At the time of the study, the researcher served as a school leader at the elementary level in another building within the same district and did not supervise any of the teachers at the middle school site of the study.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited by the following constraints:

1. Because the participants in this study are all employed in one rural middle school, results may not be applicable beyond the group of participants who are specific to this sample.
2. The researcher's role as the former curriculum director and professional development coordinator could contribute to some of the participants not being completely forthcoming with their responses.

Delimitations of the Study

This study was intentionally delimited by the following characteristics by the researcher:

1. The participants in this study were limited to those teaching 5th through 8th-grade students at the time of the study. Participants involved in this study were limited to teachers from the same middle school in a rural school district in the upper Midwest.
2. The study was limited to the practices and procedures associated with participants' point of view and experiences at the time the interviews were conducted and completed, in that, the researcher is a novice in interview procedures, the results may have been influenced by the investigator's aptitude in this area.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 presented information about professional development and its development in public school education. Research on professional development was introduced providing context for this study that sought to describe middle school teachers lived experiences with professional development. The statement of the problem, purpose of the study, key research questions, and the significance of the study were detailed along with information about the

researcher and the context of the study. Chapter 2 includes a review of literature and research on recent efforts of researchers and educators to explore optimal professional development types. The methodology of this study will be described in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 includes the findings. A summary and discussion of the study and its possible implications, as well as recommendations for future practice, are examined in Chapter 5.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to obtain a better understanding of professional development based on teachers' perceptions of their past professional development experiences and how those experiences impacted their professional practice. This was done through a thorough analysis of the told experiences of middle school teachers in one rural school district. This chapter provides an extensive review of the literature and research associated with the evolution of PD and the current topics pertaining to the effectiveness of PD offered to teachers in Pk-12 education. This review of related literature pertains to studies that have been conducted in reference to teacher PD and what has emerged as effective professional development. Through this literature review, various components are described to provide a detailed look at factors that contribute to effective PD, the impact of PD on student achievement, the benefits of personalized learning, the role teacher collaboration plays on educator development, and the impact that reflection on practice has on teaching and teacher self-efficacy. An overview of the literature pertaining to the studied aspects of professional development upon the lived experiences of teachers is offered.

To locate literature, the researcher used a variety of sources. Primarily, the I.D. Weeks Library through the University of South Dakota was used to search for literature relevant to this study. *Google Scholar* was also utilized by the researcher to gather resources. The researcher used terms such as personalized learning, effective professional development, teacher collaboration, teacher reflection, teacher self-efficacy, student achievement, and narrative inquiry to find articles and other sources for the purpose of reviewing literature for this study. Other resources included internet databases, published books, journals, dissertations, and studies.

Research was peer-reviewed, focusing mainly on works from the years 2011 through 2021, but including some older sources from seminal authors that provided background information to the study. The researcher adhered to the formatting guidelines from *the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association; seventh edition* to write this dissertation.

Professional development for teachers has undergone significant changes since the mid-1990s, varying from pre-planned top-down approaches to teacher training, to that of helping educators develop according to their needs and the needs of their students. As early as the mid-1990's, Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) were discussing the importance that professional development plays in teacher preparation and the impact it has on redesigning education. They outlined the need for reformed and effective PD plans that are teacher and student-centered and the importance of teachers learning by doing, reading, and reflecting, collaborating with other teachers, looking closely at students and their work, and sharing what they see (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). This kind of learning enables teachers to make the leap from theory to accomplished practice. In an analysis of 106 resources, Whitworth and Chiu (2015) found that there was a multitude of factors that influenced teacher change and the effectiveness of professional development, including the important role that school and district leaders play in the planning and implementation of PD. Whitworth and Chiu (2015) reviewed over one hundred sources when studying the link between leader involvement and teacher PD that impacts student learning. Study results from Whitworth and Chui (2015) indicate that school leaders play a significant role in planning and implementing PD, and providing support that leads to teacher change.

Effective Professional Development

In a review of peer-reviewed journal articles and research studies on effective PD, Demonte (2013) found that effective PD focuses on core content, or content area material, and the modeling of teaching strategies specific to the content. Such strategies provide directed and effective support for teachers of varying levels of experience and skillsets where modeling and content are the focus. The majority of PD was found to be effective when the PD aligned with school goals and was focused on core content. Demonte (2013) also noted that active learning and collaboration with continuous feedback was often identified as an effective element in the PD literature and research. According to the study findings, strategies such as observing one another serves as a compelling way to share techniques and build collaborative relationships, thereby giving directed and practical support to teachers.

Similar to the Demonte (2013) study, Richie et al. (2016) studied primary teachers from 14 classrooms in North Carolina, discussing the impact that demonstrative PD can have on teacher practice. The purpose of the study was to examine the effectiveness of demonstration by designating 14 classrooms as demonstration classrooms (Richie et al., 2016). Within each of the demonstration classrooms, teachers were asked to consistently model, share, promote, and articulate best practices. Additionally, the project aimed to improve statewide teacher effectiveness and classroom practices, promote practices that address the needs of the whole child, ensure smooth, efficient, and seamless transitions between pre-K and kindergarten and between kindergarten and first grade, and promote collaboration across the pre-K and K community. This study consisted of teachers involved in observing and teaching in demonstration classes, which were open to anyone in the state to come and observe developmentally appropriate practices in action. The findings from the study determined that

teachers increased their knowledge of how to effectively support teachers based on teaching demonstrations (Ritchie et al., 2016). Creating and maintaining classroom observations and demonstrations from one classroom to the next is a process. Ritchie et al. (2016) also discovered that throughout the demonstration process, administrators fulfilled different roles than teachers, but their support and involvement were key to sustaining an embedded PD program and in continuing collaborative conversations.

In a review of over 25 articles related to analyzing the impact that collaborative PD has on the effectiveness of the program, Stewart (2014) found that PD efforts are maximized when educators are encouraged to play an active role in their learning, and when they work together toward a common goal. Stewart's review of the literature also determined the importance of PD focused on what a teacher chooses to study, how they study, and with whom they study. Teacher learning is most impactful when participants are part of a learning community with others from their program or those who teach the same student levels and type of content (Stewart, 2014).

Teacher input and active participation in the PD process is essential. In a case study reporting interview results from four principals and eight teachers, Bradley (2014) studied the link between teacher evaluation and professional growth. One finding from the study was that leaders who wished to implement change had to realize the importance of creating a shared vision and then allow teachers the time to implement learning from the PD. As part of Bradley's study, teachers were given options for how they wanted to design their professional learning. The results of the study found that active engagement in professional learning led to an increase in collaborative efforts (Bradley, 2014). According to Bradley (2014), results from the study suggest that leaders must recognize that teachers' growth is dependent on job-embedded professional learning, which leads to shared ownership in one's own effectiveness.

One way in which to assist teachers in sharing ownership of their learning is by offering training through flexible methods. In a meta-analysis of 12 years of publications, Surette and Johnson (2015) analyzed 20 empirical studies to determine the effectiveness of online PD. More specifically, the focus of the investigation was to determine how well online PD facilitated the critical features of PD outlined in Desimone's (2009) work. These critical features included content-focused PD, the incorporation of active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation. The study findings based on the analysis indicated that the online PD was effective in providing meaningfully integrated content-focused PD as well as engaging participants in active learning (Surette & Johnson, 2015). An additional finding from the study highlighted the fact that teachers were able to reflect on their teaching using an online platform. However, according to Surette and Johnson's (2015) meta-analysis, few studies included the PD features of coherence and duration which represented a gap in the research.

Teachers having the opportunity to be actively engaged in PD proved to be essential to teachers participating in a qualitative study by Denham et al. (2016). As part of this study on the integration of active game-based training for teachers, Denham et al. (2016) discussed the increased practice of game-based learning in classrooms, and the need for teachers to be proficient in facilitating this new type of learning. For this group of secondary teachers to feel confident in presenting this new learning, they took part in experiential PD in which they learned to teach game-based lessons by doing so themselves. Deham et al. (2016) found that active learning, as practiced in game-based PD, benefits teachers who are seeking to improve their practice, and is needed in order for teachers to construct their knowledge on a new topic.

Personalized Learning

Personalized learning is defined as an educational approach that varies the learning objectives, instructional methods, content, and assessment methods based on the needs of the student, with the involvement of the student in selecting content and educational objectives (Virginia Department of Education, 2020). Such learning was the focus of a study by Macias (2017) who sought to determine the effectiveness of professional development when teachers are provided the opportunity to choose the topics and plan and deliver the training. Macias (2017) studied the effectiveness of professional development when teacher leaders were asked to choose the topics, and plan and deliver the training. Following three years of annual teacher-led Professional Development events, Macias (2017) gathered survey information from participants at the end of years two and three. Forty-five conference participants made up of teachers, parents, and administrators all completed evaluation surveys. The completed surveys indicated that participants enjoyed practical topics, appreciated a neutral and comfortable environment, and benefitted from diverse presenters. According to Macias (2017), findings from the study strongly suggest that a positive environment for professional learning assists in developing teachers into leaders.

In a review of the literature regarding new and existing forms of teacher PD, McLeskey (2011) discussed the emergence of what is labeled as learner-centered professional development. Based on the concepts of personal growth and collaboration, learner-centered PD takes on a similar approach to personalized learning. Using past experiences, knowledge of what is needed in their classrooms, and the choice of learning styles and materials, teachers taking part in learner-centered PD were able to apply their learning in ways that contributed to improved practice (McLeskey, 2011). McLeskey's (2011) review of literature on PD and improved

practice yielded the following findings: a) an increased interest in forms of PD that improves teacher practice and student outcomes, b) traditional forms of PD have demonstrated little impact on teacher practices, c) newer forms of PD which focus on teachers as learners have been shown to be an effective way to improve student outcomes, and d) administrators play a critical role in providing high-quality PD.

In a study that also sought to highlight the benefits of learner-centered PD, Polly and Hannafin (2011) detailed the efforts of two elementary teachers who spent an instructional year implementing new teaching strategies that focused on learners. Results from this study indicate that the practices observed in the classroom did not match the intention of professional development. Polly and Hannafin (2011) attribute this to a lack of ongoing support to scaffold the transition from PD to the classroom. This study found that classroom implementation was best aligned to PD when directly adopted or planned by staff (Polly & Hannafin, 2011). According to the researchers, true investment in possible changes to classroom instruction needs to be tied to PD that involves teachers as engaged participants (Polly & Hannafin, 2011).

Nishimura (2014) examined the traits of effective PD to plan and provide individual coaching to teachers on inclusive practices for students with disabilities. Such practices included PD which was school-based, involved coaching and follow-up procedures with collaboration, and embedded practice in the daily lives of teachers involving various methods of co-teaching (Nishimura, 2014). As part of this quantitative study conducted in Southern California, 121 elementary teachers were initially surveyed about their beliefs on inclusive practices to establish a baseline. After eight weeks of implementing inclusive practices in professional development sessions, results were gathered using the survey again to measure changes in perceptions of inclusive education practices. In comparing the results from the pre and post-administration of

the survey, there were no significant changes to note. The researcher notes that a more extended treatment timeframe could impact future studies. However, individual coaching as a method for delivering PD requires further research and therefore, illustrates the need to explore this concept further (Nishimura, 2014). Further exploration of the impact of coaching as an effective method of delivering teacher PD was explored by Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), who discussed that coaching or other expert scaffolding can support the effective implementation of new approaches by teachers, also increasing chances for teachers to enact desired practices and apply them appropriately.

Teacher choice in professional development was examined by Schrum and Levin (2013) with the integration of technology in teaching. The integration necessitated the training of teachers on not only how to implement technology into their lessons, but to train them on the use and benefits of technology. Seeking to understand how exemplary schools accomplish this, Schrum and Levin (2013) identified eight exemplary secondary schools in the US. They interviewed school and teacher leaders to gather data on how to implement a new initiative by using effective PD planning. The findings from the study revealed that leaders felt teachers should be able to pick what they want to learn and how they want to learn it and that it should then be made available to teachers when they are ready to learn (Schrum & Levin, 2013). The study also found that teachers themselves shared that such differentiation is essential to making PD as effective as possible for both teachers and ultimately students.

Teachers pick learning that fits their needs, whether it's offered in their school or not. In an effort to learn more about professional endeavors that teachers are pursuing on their own, Tour (2017) conducted an in-depth case study with three practicing teachers in Melbourne, Australia to find out more about what types of new knowledge are sought after through digital

learning referred to as Personal Learning Networks (PLNs). In this five-month study, observations and interviews were conducted in which the researcher sought to learn about teachers' self-initiated professional learning. The study showed teachers becoming more independent and informed learners who could develop their professional capacities while increasing the relevance of their learning. This led to increased feelings of professional engagement and motivation (Tour, 2017). A recommendation from the findings supports giving teachers more of an active role in their learning and allowing them to be both learners and experts (Tour, 2017). While this study pointed out the benefits of personalized learning through digital modalities, the findings of increased engagement and interest are applicable to situations where the learner is able to have input in the content.

Teacher Collaboration

The importance of teacher collaboration has been studied for many years, with Garmston and Wellman (1998) sharing their ideas that a staff's capacity for talking together may be the most significant investment teachers can make for student learning. They also described the importance of teamwork between co-teachers and how critical it is to the success of a cooperative professional development model. In their qualitative study, Shaffer and Brown (2015) studied informal conversations between three teachers. The researchers were looking to show the importance of professional development in addressing the needs of teachers in co-teaching situations. Upon completion of the study, Shaffer and Brown (2015) determined that teamwork between the teachers was essential for the success of the embedded professional development. The reports of the participants, the interview data, and conversations with participants point to the importance of teamwork among teachers (Shaffer & Brown, 2015). The researchers, based on the findings, suggest that job-embedded professional development which

brings teachers together can be more impactful than traditional PD methods, as teamwork between co-teachers is critical to the success of a cooperative professional development model. Therefore, Shaffer and Brown (2015) concluded that embedded PD can build a cohesive program for working and learning together, and is relevant to the needs of the team of teachers.

The benefits of teacher collaboration have been researched in many ways. In a qualitative study involving ten secondary teachers in Singapore, Chong and Kong (2012) examined recorded discussions, field notes, journal recordings, and interviews to determine the impact of teacher collaboration on professional growth. Results showed that there were multiple benefits to teachers collaborating including improved content knowledge and application of new pedagogy, expanded scaffolding of ideas, increased inspiration to create new innovative practices relying on goal-driven lesson design, and additional opportunities to reflect (Chong & Kong, 2012).

Time to reflect together is important to teachers themselves. Steeg and Lambson (2015) studied the effects of providing time for teachers to meet regularly by allocating weekly early release intended to contribute to the success of implemented book studies, case study reflections, and textbook explorations. The study focused on subject matter content, active teacher learning, coherence with knowledge and beliefs, school reforms and practices, and the duration of the activity (Steeg & Lambson, 2015). Data gathered throughout this study were also used to inform the implementation of a collaborative approach to PD. Findings from the study point to the importance of time allocated for teachers to be able to implement new practices. Weekly early release contributed to the success of implemented book studies, case study reflections, and textbook exploration, as teachers were able to use this time to collaborate.

In a qualitative study by Burke (2013), four Spanish teachers in a K-12 setting collaborated with one another and with university instructors. The teachers and instructors were

observed and field notes were gathered on the topic of professional communication. This qualitative study aimed to measure the effectiveness of having practicing K-12 teachers experience professional development by being provided time and support to implement innovative, communicative instruction. Throughout the study, the K-12 teachers met regularly to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of their work, and to collaborate on future lessons. The K-12 teachers and the university instructors all kept reflective journals on this experiential way of delivering a new instructional strategy to practicing K-12 teachers (Burke, 2013). As a result of experiential professional development, K-12 teachers implemented communicative activities into their daily instruction. During the study, professional modeling, coaching, and feedback contributed to K-12 teachers' perceptions of their capacity to implement effective instruction. Burke (2013) found that teacher collaboration impacted the success of professional development. Findings suggest that K-12 teachers who are provided time to practice approaches and reflect on their effectiveness with the approaches contribute to the success of experiential professional development. The study found that experiential professional development affected the K-12 teacher's understanding and integrations of methods while Burke (2013) recommended that professional goals should be identified and worked on as a group. The study determined that communication among K-12 teachers such as coaching and feedback contributed to their perceptions of being able to implement effective instruction.

A study by Umekubo (2015) included 27,500 students in grades 5-8 in 44 schools within the Montague Elementary School District in California. The study explored a formal structure, the cohort model, which the California decentralized district put in place over a decade ago. As part of this study, schools were clustered into cohorts to facilitate professional development for leadership teams within all 44 schools of the district. A single case study design was used to

examine how a district created opportunities for individuals within an organization to bring together strengths and specific expertise, shared through collaboration, to support learning for the whole organization (Umekubo, 2015). Schools within this large district were grouped into cohorts for collaboration throughout the study. Findings from the study suggest that trusting relationships foster strong collaboration amongst principals and lead to higher levels of social and intellectual capital, which, in turn, enables schools and cohorts to practice the components of organizational learning. In addition, according to Umekubo (2015), the schools within the district achieved sustained increases in student achievement.

Teacher collaboration has also been seen in the form of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). PLCs include the integration of time for collaboration within a school to allow specialty area teachers, classroom teachers, and grade-level supervisors to meet on a regular basis to ensure high levels of learning for all students (DuFour, 2004). The concept of PLCs has evolved over the years, with one model by DuFour (2004) identifying four key components to consider when analyzing a PLC including 1) a focus on learning; 2) a collaborative culture, including shared beliefs, values, and vision, and an atmosphere of trust and respect; 3) a focus on results and; 4) a commitment to continuous improvement and hard work. According to DuFour (2004), one method for increasing collaboration in schools is by observing one another, which can serve as a compelling way to share techniques and build collaborative relationships. Recent research on PLCs expands the definition to include operating under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded, learning for teachers, moving from interest to commitment (DuFour et al., 2016). Van Clay et al. (2011) describes the strategic responsibilities of implementing a collaborative culture, which includes the use of common vocabulary among teachers, taking responsibility for every student in every

class, accessing current research, analyzing data to improve learning, and regularly observing the best practice instruction of others.

Peer observation was examined by Ritchie et al. (2016), who produced a qualitative study that examined the impact of observation among elementary teachers in primary grades within 14 schools. It was found that when teachers had opportunities to observe peers, teacher to teacher support increased thus suggesting that peer observations may be an effective professional development model to increase teacher to teacher support (Ritchie et al., 2016). McLeskey (2011) also found that when teachers collectively worked with other professionals who shared similar interests and knowledge, teachers were more apt to reflect together and plan how their new learning could be implemented in classrooms to benefit students.

Utilizing classes for demonstration, also known as a learning lab, highlights the importance of administrator support, which emerges as a critical factor in making PD impactful to practice (Ritchie et al., 2016). Administrators fulfill different roles than teachers, but their support and involvement are vital to sustaining an embedded PD program, especially when planning the logistics of when, where, and how the observers are learning from peers. Increasing collaboration among administrators and teachers throughout the planning and observation process enhances and sustains professional dialogue (Ritchie et al., 2016). In a review of over 25 articles related to analyzing the impact that collaboration has on the effectiveness of a PD program, Stewart (2014) found that PD efforts are maximized when teachers are encouraged to play an active role in their learning, and when educators work together toward a common goal. Stewart (2014) also found that PD is most effective when teachers feel connected to a community of practice, or when they work alongside those who share professional commonalities.

Teacher collaboration has also been studied as a potential indicator of teacher leadership likeliness. In a quantitative study of 716 teachers in multiple states, Derrington and Angelle (2013) collected survey data that yielded a strong correlation between teacher collaboration and the extent of teacher leadership in a school. Results from the survey found that collaboration aids teachers with the greatest benefits coming from teachers discussing ways to improve student learning, asking each other for assistance with student behavior issues, and offering support to each other on teaching a new concept or skill (Derrington & Angelle, 2013).

Teacher collaboration studies also point to the benefits that working together can have beyond the K-12 realm. Three years into a five-year study on collaboration between middle and high school teachers and university faculty, Knowlton et al. (2015) reported positive outcomes of collectively working together. As part of this study, 28 science faculty from universities across Rhode Island partnered with 22 middle and high school science teachers to create an online resource center to house resources and technology-based teaching materials. The participants in the study also planned PD workshops for in-service teachers during a summer institute. Survey data collected from participants in the study showed that university faculty members exposed to new pedagogy and learning strategies gained an increased understanding of the realities involved with teaching at the middle and high school levels (Knowlton et al., 2015). Most university faculty members agreed that increasing the investigative nature of teaching would benefit college students. In addition, most of the university faculty members reported making a change to their teaching after collaborating with middle and high school teachers. The middle and high school teachers also reported the benefit of increased knowledge of science content and current research after working with the university faculty. Ultimately, both groups reported overwhelmingly that

the one-on-one collaboration with their partner to complete tasks was the highlight of the experience (Knowlton et al., 2015).

Robinson et al. (2014) illustrate another example of the benefits of collaboration between university faculty and K-12 teachers. Two university faculty spent a period of two years working closely with 46 participants from K-12 to embed and enhance their practice of using formative assessment effectively and efficiently. Through teacher input, survey data, course survey information, and district performance data, it was found that the K-12 participants indicated an increase in their understanding of using formative assessment in their classrooms. Robinson et al. (2014) suggest that fostering more opportunities for teachers to have sustained dialogue and collaboration across classrooms and grade levels about instructional techniques and assessment could impact student learning.

Professional Development and Student Success, Academic Growth

Paramount to the efforts of PD for teachers is the goal of being able to link training to practice so that students benefit. In a four-year quantitative study by Akiba and Liang (2016), which included 467 Middle School math teachers and 11,000 students, the effects of multiple types of PD and the link to student achievement were examined. This study examined six different types of professional learning opportunities and the impact they had on student achievement, including district-sponsored workshops, various collaboration strategies, university or college coursework, attendance at professional conferences, informal communication, and individual teacher initiatives. Utilizing standardized assessment scores in math and teacher surveys, findings from the data analysis indicate that teacher-centered, collaborative learning activities on mathematics teaching and learning seem to be more effective in improving student achievement than learning activities that do not necessarily involve these communications

including university courses and individual learning activities. Akiba and Liang (2016) recorded findings that point to the significant positive impact of informal communications among colleagues on student achievement as opposed to teachers participating in mostly formal teacher collaboration activities. Further results of this study indicate that teacher-centered collaborative activities and increased opportunities for informal communication had a more significant impact on student achievement than did formal training (Akiba & Liang, 2016).

How teachers engage with PD has been shown to impact their practice and affect student achievement. According to Shaha and Ellsworth (2013), teachers need high-impact training to continually improve their teaching practices. The driving research question behind Shaha and Ellsworth's quantitative study was whether schools with higher utilization of engagement in on-demand online professional development experienced a more significant impact on student achievement than those of lower utilization or engagement. The following areas were studied including educator engagement in other metrics or areas of utilization, participation and engagement, student performance, and other measures of school- and educator-related success. Following two years of analyzing usage of on-demand online PD, Shaha and Ellsworth (2013) found substantiated significant advantages to the impact of professional development as well as indicating that the higher utilizers achieved significantly greater gains in student achievement. While this study points to the impact that regular, effective PD has on student achievement, there remains a need to explore how customized PD for each teacher may also positively affect student achievement.

Professional development can be improved by calibrating teacher learning opportunities to teachers' prior knowledge (Minor et al., 2016). In this study, composed of fourteen middle school science teachers, interviews and teacher reflections provided insight into how teacher

content knowledge moderates the effect of professional development and how the nature of PD moderates that relationship. The premise of the study was that teachers learn and do as a result of high-quality content professional development which depends on their prior knowledge.

Moreover, teachers' application of content and pedagogy from focused professional development also relates to their prior experience. With both professional development that only focused on content knowledge as well as training that focused on content plus pedagogy, teachers tended to implement the PD that fit their needs, depending on their prior content knowledge (Minor et al., 2016). The results of this study suggest that differentiating professional development could be advantageous, as this study shows teachers take away what they are ready to take away, from a traditional PD model. According to Minor et al. (2016), PD that is tailored to teachers' needs and prior knowledge holds great promise

Further exploration of the link between teacher PD and student achievement revealed that when PD was focused on a specific instructional strategy and was consistently monitored throughout an instructional period, positive student gains resulted (Yurtseven & Altun, 2016). One such framework, known as Understanding by Design (UbD) was implemented in Turkey with ten teachers and over 400 students. Yurtseven and Altun (2016) sought to study how teacher PD positively influences student achievement. In this mixed-methods study, teachers were interviewed to ascertain their level of learning about how to consistently implement a learning design that provided step-by-step instructions for the delivery of secondary English lessons. Ten teachers implemented UbD consistently, adhering to consistent instructional methods, which included using big ideas, essential questions, performance tasks, enduring understanding, tailoring instruction to students' needs, and bringing methodological diversity to instruction (Yurtseven & Altun, 2016). Through speaking, listening, and reading groups, the teachers

consistently implemented the approaches learned. The study found that allowing the teacher participants to pursue their PD as a team and make decisions in a collaborative way proved to be advantageous. Results from Yurtseven and Altun (2016) study indicated a significant increase in student achievement due to this UbD approach to teacher PD.

Teacher Reflection and Self-Efficacy

Prompted reflections at certain points over time and focused on one's teaching can yield growth for early career and experienced teachers (Fox et al., 2015). When teachers have the opportunity to reflect on their practice regularly, and over time, greater awareness of their practice can help to redirect their actions. According to Fox et al. (2015), keeping a portfolio can help to focus teachers' reflections and guide their development. As part of a study made up of 47 teachers, Fox et al. (2015) prompted teacher participants to reflect at certain points over a year-long study. Five sets of prompted reflections were completed by both early career teachers and experienced teachers. Findings showed that early career teachers reported more growth in pedagogical knowledge upon completion of the study. Experienced teachers benefitted more from targeted, specific professional development (Fox et al., 2015). Results from both early career teachers and the more experienced educators showed a general increase in teacher efficacy or empowerment as a result of actively reflecting on their practice (Fox et al., 2015).

Teacher efficacy is the extent to which teachers feel capable of helping students learn, not perception beyond what a teacher is actually capable of, but rather how capable they believe they are in their profession (Althausen, 2015). As part of this study, Althausen (2015) researched the possibility of increased teacher efficacy among 35 third-grade teachers from schools in the southeastern part of the United States. Participants took part in a two-year PD program that focused intensely on strategies for increasing mathematics performance. One of the guiding

research questions was whether increasing content knowledge and capacity for teaching foundational math skills would also increase teacher efficacy. The PD program itself focused on process standards, improving conceptual understanding in mathematics, increasing the use of effective instructional techniques, increasing formative assessment measures, and aligning district mathematics curriculum to that of state and national standards (Althausen, 2015). Through analyzing teacher survey results centered on teacher efficacy, the study found that teachers' efficacy was increased as a result of the sustained two-year PD plan (Althausen, 2015). In particular, the survey item that most directly linked student achievement to greater teacher efficacy was the teachers' feeling that they were better able to answer students' questions about math. This resulted in greater student achievement, and the increased math knowledge left the teachers with greater efficacy (Althausen, 2015).

In a study including 87 K-8 teachers, the components of effective PD were studied by Roberts et al. (2010). During this case study, PD components including elongated time frames, personal engagement with content and strategies, and involvement with a professional community were examined. Roberts et al. (2010) found that different cohorts within a master teacher program offered insight into how their self-study, inquiry, and research as teachers shaped their future practice. Through teacher reflection, the use of data from case studies, and monthly meetings as part of the initiative, teachers reported increased confidence and courage as instructors, increased appreciation of collaboration and community, and increased professionalism.

Teacher self-efficacy is impacted in part by their attitude toward PD and their willingness to improve their own learning. In a study on teachers' attitudes towards professional development, archival data from 1,120 schools in Kentucky were examined to determine if there

was any relationship between teachers' attitudes towards professional development and school performance. Yuejin (2016) used the 2013 Kentucky Teaching, Empowering, Leading, and Learning (TELL) survey data and the 2013 school accountability profile data from the Kentucky Department of Education (Yuejin, 2016). Focused on teacher perceptions, the study aimed to contribute to an understanding of what PD leads to improved student learning. The study found that teachers' attitudes towards their professional development significantly predicted the schools' overall performance at the elementary and middle school levels (Yuejin, 2016). Yuejin (2016) found that a key predicting variable was that of encouraging teachers to reflect in practice.

Through a questionnaire administered to 887 teachers in a large urban area, Camburn and Han (2015) sought to investigate how teachers' engagement in various PD experiences impacts teacher reflective practice and changed literacy instructional practices. The study focused on methods to help teachers deal with uncertainties in their work including; 1) guidance about what and how to teach including regular and ongoing opportunities to develop their practice, 2) opportunities to regularly and critically reflect on their practice, and 3) teacher professional learning that impacts their professional practice. According to the data analysis, Camburn and Han (2015) found that teacher learning experiences were more likely to influence teachers' thinking about their practice when the content was focused on instruction. Moreover, professional development focused on school-wide issues had a weak association with reflective practice. Therefore, teachers who were given the opportunity to work with instructional content coaches were more likely to report changes in their instruction. The findings from Camburn and Han's (2015) study suggest that teachers who actively engage in their own learning experience

have greater opportunities for interaction and collaboration with colleagues than do teachers whose professional development is delivered in a passive participant format.

Correll (2017) details the story of a new middle school teacher in Texas as she participated in induction activities throughout the year. The induction activities were designed to monitor agency and grow efficacy. Correll (2017) distinguishes the term efficacy, which applies to belief in one's ability to succeed, from agency, which is described as the ability to make choices about and take an active role in shaping a course of action by making adjustments as needed. The study found that when the new teacher regularly reflected on her practice, she was more likely to incorporate meaningful change into their daily practice (Correll, 2017). Also, as part of Correll's (2017) work, it was noted that supporting an increase of efficacy-building practices for the individual teacher resulted in an increase in collective efficacy as well. Collective efficacy leads to improved student outcomes and is made up of individual agency, role agency, campus agency, district agency, and system agency (Corell, 2017).

In a mixed-methods study of a PD model based on the principles of reflection with a focus on measuring self-efficacy development, Kayapinar (2016) studied a group of 45 internationally certified teachers. Data from the study was collected from reflective journals, peer observations, co-planning sessions, Likert responses, PD workshop notes, feedback notes, and focus group discussions. Conclusions from the data analysis suggest that teachers' abilities to reflect can be determined and then improved by observations and experience (Kayapinar, 2016). Findings from the study indicate that examining the reflection of teachers could lead to more highly qualified teachers. According to Royster et al. (2014), when teachers have a better understanding of a concept, they are more likely to have a more positive attitude toward it.

Bayar (2014) shared research on professional development which shed light on specific factors of teacher learning that should be included in a comprehensive professional development plan, encompassing the teacher's needs and increasing their efficacy and ability to implement new learning. The components of an effective comprehensive plan include a match to teacher's needs, a match to school needs, teacher involvement in the design, planning, facilitating of PD, opportunities for active participation, and long-term engagement. Aligning with the components of Bayar (2014), the study findings suggest that having topics identified by administrators and delivered one session at a time is not as impactful as PD which is sustained and integrated into practice. According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2009), an effective professional development plan should be intensive, ongoing, connected to practice, focused on student learning, aligned to school goals and curriculum content, and encouraging teacher collaboration. Bradley (2014) also found that shared ownership and teacher collaboration in professional development positively impacts staff development.

Kaniuka (2012) discusses the interconnectedness of teacher expectations and efficacy, stating that they are interrelated to such a degree that as efficacy changes, so do the expectations that teachers have of themselves and to their students. According to Kaniuka (2012), advancing through professional identities happens by taking part in professional activities. In a qualitative study that explicitly sought to study teacher self-efficacy in an early childhood professional development school, Epstein and Willhite (2015) used survey data to determine if and how efficacy increases when practicing teachers serve as mentors to pre-service teachers. In this study, which took place in a Midwestern community, fourteen mentor teachers each worked with a pre-service teacher for fourteen weeks to co-plan and co-teach a shared class. A survey with twelve questions was administered both before and after the completion of the study. The most

definitive theme that emerged was increased reflection skills for both groups. Findings from the study indicate that mentor teachers found it valuable to analyze their teaching so they could share with their mentees. Additionally, efficacy was also reported to increase in terms of instructional and management techniques used in the classroom following the study (Epstein & Willhite, 2015).

Yoo (2016) conducted a mixed-method study in which 148 K-12 teachers engaged in online PD and then analyzed the possible growth of their efficacy by completing the Teacher's Self-Efficacy Scale twice in a five-week timeframe. Results indicated that teachers' professional development effort had a positive effect on teacher efficacy. Teachers in the study viewed themselves as more effective and knowledgeable when given a chance to increase their capacity to improve student achievement which, according to Kaniuka (2012), can happen in PD. Findings from the Yoo (2016) study also suggest that the practice of examining one's efficacy requires intentional planning.

Summary

As evidenced in this review of literature, research on teacher PD is vast and informative to practice. While an undergraduate program may prepare a teacher for the responsibilities of the classroom, it is professional development, typically presented by a school district, which moves teachers forward in their practice once in the classroom (Prasad, 2015). To impact teacher practice, research analyzing in-service teachers' experiences around the topic of effective PD is needed. Since the work of teaching and learning is ever-evolving, it can be assumed that PD has also not reached its most effective state in United States' schools. Much of what schools do now made sense in that past, but doesn't work for today's teachers or learners (Schwahn et al., 2011).

Key components of what comprises essential elements of PD were examined, including the elements of effective PD, the critical role that teacher collaboration plays in PD, the impact of PD on student success and academic growth, and finally the importance of teacher reflection and the examination of how PD impacts teacher self-efficacy. With the components of what makes an effective and comprehensive approach to PD defined, the purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of teachers about PD through participants' lived experiences with PD. The effectiveness of PD should be evidenced by improved teacher practice. Through analyzing the strategies historically practiced to fulfill teachers' professional needs, as well as examining teacher stories to share their experiences with PD, this study aimed to uncover aspects of PD that have been effective through the storied experiences of teachers. The forthcoming chapter will include a detailed account of the methodology used to gather and analyze the perspectives of middle school teachers in a rural school district about their lived experiences with professional development.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to obtain a better understanding of professional development based on teachers' perceptions of their past professional development experiences and how those experiences impacted their professional practice. This study aimed to gain feedback from teachers that painted a clear picture of what was needed to keep them growing as educators. Research questions began with a central question asking how middle school teachers described their experience with professional development. Following were five additional questions that addressed how middle school teachers described their experiences with PD that may have led to changes in their classroom, how middle school teachers describe their experiences with PD that met their needs as individual teachers, how middle school teachers described their involvement in PD, and how middle school teachers describe the impact of professional development on self-efficacy, and finally how PD middle school teachers describe the impact of PD on student success.

To gather data that was detailed and specific to the experiences of each participant, the researcher utilized a qualitative approach to conduct the study, specifically employing a narrative inquiry design that provided participants the opportunities to describe their own experiences. Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding and inquiring into an experience through collaboration between a researcher and participants. Narrative inquiry is the process of gathering information for research through storytelling. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) discuss this design as being a natural process, allowing humans to be storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives. Thus, narrative inquiry studies how humans experience the world, telling the stories that their lives consist of. Within this study, the researcher sought to gather

data that identified the stories of those who experienced professional development within a rural school district in the Midwest.

This chapter details the methodology used by the researcher, and also includes: a) a description of the role of the researcher, b) a detailed description of a pilot study conducted by the researcher around this topic, c) population, d) instrumentation, e) data collection, f) data analysis, and g) validity and reliability. Ethical considerations for this study were detailed, and the possible implications of this study were examined prior to detailing the components of the study itself.

Qualitative Research

A qualitative research method was used to conduct the study allowing for the research to be conducted in a natural setting. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), a qualitative methodology is most appropriate when trying to gain insight about a particular problem or issue from those closest to it. By using multiple methods to gather data and by inserting the researcher as a critical instrument in a study, qualitative research reflects the voices of the participants by constructing a multi-layered and complex description of a problem, concluding with implications to literature, and possible call for change (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Effectively introducing and focusing a qualitative study included beginning the study with a clear and concise problem that needed to be examined. This was followed by detailing the purpose of the study, which guided the research. The central question further guided the study, while the sub-questions supported the central question. Interview items were created to support the sub-questions, while the participants' responses to the interview items provided the data that was analyzed by the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By including open-ended interview items, findings from qualitative studies aim to present the *how* or *why* of a phenomenon. In this

study, the researcher explored teachers' perceptions of professional development and its impact on their professional practice. A qualitative approach was optimal for this research topic because to understand teachers' perceptions of professional development, their stories need to be included.

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), research points to as many as 45 approaches to qualitative inquiry, yet there are six that have emerged over time as the most commonly used approaches. These include basic qualitative research, phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory research, case study methods, and narrative inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Basic qualitative research fits a qualitative design in that its purpose seeks to tell the story of individuals as they construct reality in interaction with their social worlds, but does not identify as a certain type of qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Phenomenology is qualitative research that focuses on describing what participants in a study have in common as they experience a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The qualitative research approach, known as ethnography, involves intensive immersion in a setting and extensive data gathering to produce a cultural interpretation of a phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Creswell and Poth (2018) describe grounded theory research as going beyond descriptions gathered from participants to generating or discovering a theory grounded in the data collected. Case study research provides an in-depth understanding of a case or issue that is within a system that is bounded by time and place (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Narrative inquiry focuses on participants and the nature of their story, detailing the significance of the individual to the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The differences in these identified qualitative approaches helped the researcher to decide which particular method would best address the research focused on professional development for teachers in a rural school district. With a focus on the participants themselves and an interest in

learning of their experiences with PD, the researcher chose narrative inquiry as the method to conduct this study.

Narrative Inquiry

The benefits of narrative inquiry include the use of multiple methods for gathering data, the interactive role of the researcher when working with participants, and the opportunity for the lived experiences of participants told around a certain situation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Narrative inquiry is set apart from phenomenology and case study by the relationship that develops between the researcher and the gathered stories of the participants. Put differently, in the context of a narrative inquiry, the production of research texts follows the art of engagement in a storied research relationship that is never final, and could always be otherwise (Cain et al., 2013). It is the artistry of a relationship that allows for understanding and acts of representation to follow and which goes beyond the phenomenon alone or the examination of the case. The use of narrative inquiry supports gathering data in the form of participants' descriptions of their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study examined teachers' perceptions of professional development through a thorough analysis of the lived experiences of teachers. The researcher used narrative inquiry to explore the stories of individuals, and was, therefore, able to examine the lived experiences of a group of individuals around a common event (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Multiple types of data gathering instruments including semi-structured interviews, reflective writing artifacts, and follow-up interviews were used. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), narrative inquiry is useful for this type of research because researchers use participants' stories or lived experiences as the data.

Narrative inquiry is not without challenges, including the complex role of the researcher to uncover the meaning behind data and to reconcile that with their own political and personal

background so as shape or re-story the account in the most accurate manner (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The narrative inquiry used in this research study enabled the researcher to explore participants' attitudes, interests, feelings, and ideas on professional development. To accomplish this purpose, the semi-structured interview was used to elicit data from participants as the source of information. By gathering the stories and experiences of individual teachers around PD, the researcher became part of the process of re-telling the stories to gain an understanding of PD from those who experienced professional development in a rural district.

Role of the Researcher

The ethics of this study were examined through the lens of the researcher and that of narrative inquiry design. Creswell and Poth (2018) detail several ethical considerations for researchers to adhere to when conducting qualitative studies, including obtaining proper permissions, properly citing published works, being prepared to answer questions about the institutional review of the study, being prepared to answer editorial questions, taking responsibility for the content of the study, protecting the confidentiality of the participants, and obtaining permission for the use of any copyrighted materials. In this study, the researcher knew the participants. Therefore, it was especially crucial to assure the participants that their stories would be shared as they told them, including only their thoughts and responses. Also, they were assured that their responses would be anonymous, and they reserved the right not to respond to any questions, or to drop out of the study at any point.

This study took place in a small community in a rural area where the researcher previously worked alongside the participants. At the time of the study, the researcher was a building principal at the elementary level and did not have a direct supervisory role over the participants in the study. Due to the small size of the community, relationships between the

participants and the researcher remained throughout the study. Due to the acquaintance of the researcher and the participants, potential risks and benefits to the study were considered. Risks included the participants possibly feeling that their privacy had been invaded, or having painful memories resurrected. Benefits included opportunities for participants to expand on personal successes or high points (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Within this study, the researcher maintained a rigorous purpose in seeking to know the experiences of participants with PD.

In this narrative inquiry study, participants were assured of their confidentiality in the initial invitation to participate. They were also assured that the researcher had secured all proper permissions from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study. Adhering to such ethical practices was critical to this study, and added to the implications of gathering feedback to inform change in the researcher's and the participants' schools, as well as schools across the United States and abroad.

Pilot Study

A pilot study took place over a year before the full study and utilized a similar methodology. The participants in the pilot study were three of the 35 teachers in the specified middle school. The participants ranged in age, cultural background, years of experience, and content and grade level taught. One of the teachers was a male in his second year as a science teacher. He was a traditionally prepared biologist but returned to school to become a teacher in his late twenties. The second teacher, a female, was in her thirteenth year of teaching English language arts. She was born and raised in the same town where she continued to teach. The third participant, a female, taught various subjects over twenty-five years and grew up on a farm in the state where the study took place.

The pilot study sought to uncover teachers' perceptions of professional development in the school district. The research questions for the pilot study included looking at the components of professional development that middle school teachers define as effective, seeking information about how the planning and delivery of professional development can change to increase teacher engagement in PD, and information on customizing PD to meet individual teacher needs.

Each participant was interviewed, and the interview was recorded. All interviews were transcribed. Each line was numbered and organized by each participant's response to each item. The data were then analyzed. Seven themes emerged from the data collected. The themes included that teachers should: 1) have a voice in the process of planning PD, 2) operate from clearly articulated goals, 3) collaborate, 4) have access to content-specific training, 5) be engaged in their learning, 6) have access to PD that is systematic and sustained over time, and 7) receive PD that is relevant and applicable to practice.

Following the completion of the pilot study, the research questions and the interview items were edited and refined to allow the full study to uncover more of the participants' experiences with professional development. Expanding the study to include more interview items allowed the researcher to examine the practice of PD through a lens which paints a more comprehensive picture and doesn't simply seek to discuss what needs to improve. Rather, the whole experience of the participants around the topic of professional development was examined.

Population

The participants in this study included middle school teachers from one upper Midwestern rural district. Twenty-nine middle school teachers served approximately 440 students in the district. Of the 29 teachers, one held a specialist degree, and eight held a master's

degree. The average years of experience among these teachers were 13.7 years. Two of the teachers were non-tenured with no more than three years of experience.

Purposeful sampling was used in this study. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), purposeful sampling is used when the researcher wants to uncover information or gain insight from the participants. Therefore, it must include a sample of participants who have insight into the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To recruit participants for this study, the researcher first informed district leaders about the study, including the superintendent and the middle school principal. Middle school classroom teachers were invited to participate in the study through an email that was sent to each middle school teacher's public school email address. The email contained a description of the study. Email recipients were asked to respond to the invitation by emailing the researcher to express interest in participating in the study.

Teachers from the middle school that were selected as participants in this study were teachers from various content areas, with at least two years of experience in the school where the study took place, and also were considered for what they could add to the research (Hennink, 2014). The goal was to find between eight and twelve participants to participate in this study. Qualitative research does not specify how many participants to include in a study. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the number of participants depends on the questions being asked, the data analysis process, and the resources that will support the study.

Instrumentation

Conducting interviews with participants in qualitative research is an effective way to provide data that can be analyzed to address the research questions. Tracy (2012) discusses the positive features of the qualitative interview by stating that the interview provides opportunities for mutual discovery, reflection, and topic understanding. The interview may also energize the

research process. For this study, the researcher developed a series of interview items that were posed to participants individually, with the assurance that their responses would be kept confidential. This was sent to all eligible participants through their state email account, which can be found on the district website.

The initial interview sought to learn about each participant and their professional journey, as well as participants' memories and perceptions of PD in relation to their individual growth, changes made in classes because of PD, and how reflection on PD may inform changes in practice. The purpose of the interview items was to encourage participants to share their experiences with professional development based on their years of teaching. Appendix A includes the interview protocol. Table 1 below details the alignment of the research questions to the initial interview items.

Table 1

Interview Items Aligned to Research Questions

Research Questions	How do middle school teachers describe their experience with professional development that led to changes in their classroom?	How do middle school teachers describe their experiences with professional development that met their needs as individual teachers?	How do middle school teachers describe their involvement in professional development?	How do teachers describe the impact of professional development on their self-efficacy as teachers?	How do middle school teachers describe the impact of professional development on student success and academic growth?
Interview Items	<p>Describe your experiences with professional development.</p> <p>How has learning from professional development in the past led to changes in your practice?</p>	<p>Describe your growth as a teacher based on your experience with professional development.</p> <p>Based on your professional development experiences, how would you design an ideal professional development?</p>	<p>Describe your involvement with professional development.</p> <p>Based on your experiences, how would you like to be involved in professional development?</p>	<p>How do you feel about your growth as a teacher based on your experience with professional development?</p> <p>Based on your professional development experiences, what do you feel you need individually from professional learning?</p>	<p>How has learning from professional development impacted the success and the academic growth of your students?</p> <p>Based on your experiences with professional development, what has been beneficial to your students' learning?</p>

Following the initial interview, participants were asked to provide additional thoughts on professional development by responding to follow-up reflective questions (Appendix B). During this time, participants were asked to respond in writing to the following questions to reflect on their experiences with professional development and how the experiences changed their professional practice: 1) How has your experience with professional development led to changes in your classroom? 2) How has your experience with professional development led to inaction in your classroom? 3) What experiences with professional development drove you to change your teaching?

The responses to the questions were collected at the beginning of the second interview allowing participants time to reflect on their experiences with professional development before responding. A second interview was completed approximately one month after the first interview. Each participant was asked follow-up questions (Appendix C), some of which were created after the initial analysis of the data from the first interview. A number of items on the second interview were developed based on the analysis of the first set of data with the intention of probing deeper into participants' experiences with professional development. Initial follow-up interview questions included the following: 1) How have your experiences with professional development shaped your perception regarding future professional development? 2) How has professional development impacted your self-efficacy as a teacher? 3) How could professional development have a more significant impact on your self-efficacy as a teacher? 4) How could professional development have a more significant impact on student success?

Data Collection

Data were collected by interviewing participants on two different occasions and asking each participant to complete a written reflection. After the random selection of participants, each

willing participant was called. The researcher used the state's public school phone directory to contact each participant to arrange an individual interview. Individual interviews were conducted face to face at a site chosen by each participant, or via Zoom conferencing. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed through the use of an online service called ©Temi. A written transcript of each interview was given back to the participant to review for accuracy which is a strategy known as respondent validation, or member checks (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The process of respondent validation ensured that the meaning of the participants' responses was not misinterpreted. Needed changes were made to the transcripts based on the feedback from the participants. The researcher developed the second set of interview items in order to probe deeper into participants' experience with professional development. Following the first interview, participants were asked to complete a written reflection. Second interviews were then scheduled individually with each participant and again, at a location determined by the participant, or via Zoom. The second interview lasted about 30 minutes. The written reflections were collected during the second interview and recorded interviews from the second interview were transcribed. After the interviews were transcribed, participants were given an opportunity to view the transcript from their interview and provide feedback.

Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis in qualitative research should be a simultaneous process, mainly because even though the research problem and participants have been identified, the researcher is uncovering information as the research is conducted (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher does not know what will be uncovered or what the final analysis will be, as is the case in this study where participants shared their own unique experiences with PD. To organize

the data as it was collected, the process for this study followed the data analysis spiral discussed by Creswell and Poth (2018). The first step was to begin managing and organizing the data. This was followed by reading and memoing emergent ideas, describing and classifying codes into themes, developing and assessing interpretations, representing and visualizing the data, and the final step included an account of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To organize and manage the data, the researcher prepared the interview files by assigning pseudonyms to participants and storing the initial recordings on a secure server, then setting up ©Temi to prepare for transcription. The second analysis step involved reviewing transcribed data and reviewing reflective comments which were added to the margins of the transcription. During this phase of reading and memoing emergent ideas, the researcher read and re-read the data, beginning to highlight common words and phrases, as well as identifying major ideas throughout the data. The researcher also added comments to the margins noting the nature of the highlighted words and phrases. Comments were dated, and applicable headings were created so the researcher could keep memos organized throughout the readings. This process of memoing multiple times enabled the researcher to track the development of ideas through the process, thereby lending credibility to the analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The next phase of analysis that the researcher engaged in was that of describing and classifying codes into themes. Taking the ideas that emerged during the memoing phase, the researcher began to identify codes in the data. Through first cycle or initial coding, common words or phrases were examined and organized into categories, paying particular attention to what is typical or interesting during this phase (Tracy, 2012). Codes were then organized both as descriptive or summarizing participant language into common words or short themes. Creswell and Poth (2018) write that “The process of coding is central to qualitative research and involves

making sense of the text collected from interviews, observations, and documents” (p. 190). A process of coding or identifying similar aspects within the information enabled the data to be referred to and retrieved specifically for their commonalities (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

For second-level coding, the researcher went beyond the *what* in the data and looked for the *why* and *how* in the initial codes (Tracy, 2012). These findings helped to support the explanation of the patterns that emerged, and in this case, were informed by the written reflections after the first interview. For this second level or axial coding, themes were organized into a smaller number of themes or broad units of information around a common idea and then expanded on by using a detailed narrative description. The use of detailed description was provided within the setting of each participant and calls for the author to describe what they see in the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The next phase in Creswell and Poth’s (2018) data analysis spiral is that of developing and assessing interpretations. During this phase, emerging themes from the categories result in contextual understandings and theories that enable the researcher to clearly articulate the emerging themes, which ultimately informs the research findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To develop interpretations, the researcher reflected on the steps taken to develop codes, formed themes from the codes, and then organized themes to make sense of the data. During this phase, the researcher examined the data alongside the memos and reflected on their interpretation, asking such questions around the meaning of the responses (Creswell & Poth). This process resulted in the lessons learned or the interpretations from the researcher.

For the final step of data analysis, the researcher represented the data visually to compare and cross-reference categories to show the picture of the data, and to again show how the identified codes were reduced to themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To create the visual

representation, the researcher revisited the data once again, checking that the text went beyond a descriptive summary, and offered conclusions.

Validity and Reliability

Validity in qualitative research involves how research findings match reality, and reliability entails reconciling whether or not the results of the study are consistent with the data collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In qualitative research, validity and reliability are also studied through a lens of trustworthiness and rigor (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This represents itself in qualitative studies by ensuring the researcher conducts investigations ethically by being explicit about participant roles, providing clarity on how the study was conducted, and presenting the findings in a convincing manner (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The use of member checks, or taking initial data back to the participants to check that the transcript matches their responses, also aid in ensuring valid and reliable data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this study, the researcher performed member checks by taking the data back to the participants after the completion of the interviews. The participants had the opportunity to review the transcripts to see if the researcher accurately captured their experiences. The researcher then edited any disparities that were found.

Triangulation. Triangulation is the process of using multiple investigators or sources to confirm findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, the researcher employed triangulation strategies through the use of multiple, yet related, sources of data collection. Specifically, the first source of data were the initial interview with participants who provided past experiences with professional development. The next source of data were a reflection prompt that asked participants to reflect in writing how those experiences with PD led to changes. After analyzing the transcripts from the first interview and analyzing the written reflective comments, a follow-

up interview was conducted as the third source of data to draw out additional insights, and to verify information recorded in the first two sets of data. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) discuss that utilizing multiple sources of data to triangulate the information gathered in qualitative research means to compare and cross-check data to increase credibility and validity.

Researcher reflexivity. A qualitative narrative inquiry design for the study presented challenges. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), narrative inquiry requires that the researcher gather extensive data from the participants and have a clear understanding of how to look deeply into the data to draw conclusions from the data. Additionally, this research methodology required the researcher to examine carefully her own personal and political background and her role in the research. Creswell and Poth (2018) explain that the researcher's position within a qualitative study is a reflection of one's interpretation and positioned within a stance. Qualitative researchers must be open about their interpretations in their writing (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interpreting data involves making sense of the data, including the lessons learned. Part of interpreting data as a qualitative researcher may also include linking one's own interpretation to the larger research literature developed by others, resulting in a need to identify dominant from alternate interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Another strategy outlined by Merriam and Tisdall (2016) to promote validity and reliability is that of reflexivity. Reflexivity is how the researcher positions him or herself in a study and how that informs their interpretation of the study and their potential gains from the results of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, the researcher taught in the district for ten years before becoming the director of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and then the elementary level principal.

As the former director of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, the researcher had designed professional development, created and analyzed teacher surveys, experienced team meetings with the teachers, and at the time of the study, worked as a principal in the elementary school but not in a supervisory position of the middle school teachers in the study. The school is located in a small community of approximately 5,000 people, which provided opportunities for the researcher and the teachers to interact on both a professional and personal level in the community before and during the time of the study.

The researcher believed that a change needed to take place with teacher PD, which led to the study. While this was a considerable bias at the onset of the study, the researcher chose to examine the issue through a lens of wanting to know how PD experiences have impacted the practice of teachers. This curiosity is what led the researcher to pursue this topic of study and to choose narrative inquiry as the method of research. A true desire to know how teacher PD impacted the practice of participants in the study is what led the researcher to conduct the interviews and analyze the responses.

Summary

This chapter provided a description of the research methods for the narrative inquiry study. A qualitative research design was chosen for this study to address the research questions. A narrative inquiry approach was described in the chapter along with the study participants and data collection tools that were used in the study. This chapter concluded with a description of the ethical considerations and limitations of the research design. Also included, a description of the strategies used for ensuring validity and reliability in the study. The findings of this study are detailed in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4

Findings

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to obtain a better understanding of professional development based on teachers' perceptions of their past professional development experiences and how those experiences impacted their professional practice. Seven participants shared their experiences with teacher professional development through individual interviews, written reflections, and follow-up interviews. The central question that guided this study focused on how middle school teachers describe their experiences with professional development. The interview items encouraged the participants to reflect on their experiences with PD, including their practice, their self-efficacy, and the impact of PD on their students' success and academic growth.

This chapter includes demographic information about the seven participants, information on the member checks process used in the study, findings from data analysis, and a summary of the findings.

Demographic Information

The participants in this study included seven middle school teachers from one upper Midwestern rural school district. Purposeful sampling was used to invite participants to take part in this study. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), purposeful sampling is used when the researcher wants to uncover information or gain insight from the participants. Therefore, it must include a sample of participants who may add insight to the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Twenty-six middle school classroom teachers were invited to participate in the study through an email that was sent to each middle school teacher's public school email address. Of the teachers from the middle school that were invited, the seven who expressed a desire to participate were

selected. Participants represented various content areas and had at least two years of experience in the school where the study took place. The school at the time of the study was located in a small community of approximately 5,000 people.

The seven teacher participants ranged from five years of experience to over 20 years.

Table 2 includes demographic data for each of the participants in the study.

Table 2

Participant Demographic Data

Name (Pseudonym)	Years of Teaching Experience
Paula	15+
Valerie	20+
James	5+
Daniel	5+
Sarah	10+
Annie	15+
Bobbi	10+

Member Checks

The use of member checks, or taking initial data back to the participants to check that the transcript matched their responses, aided in ensuring valid and reliable data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Upon completion of each initial and follow-up interview, the responses were transcribed verbatim and sent back to each participant as an email attachment. The participants were then asked to review the transcripts carefully for needed edits or revisions. One correction was necessary, where Valerie reported that one phrase contained an incorrect acronym of a former

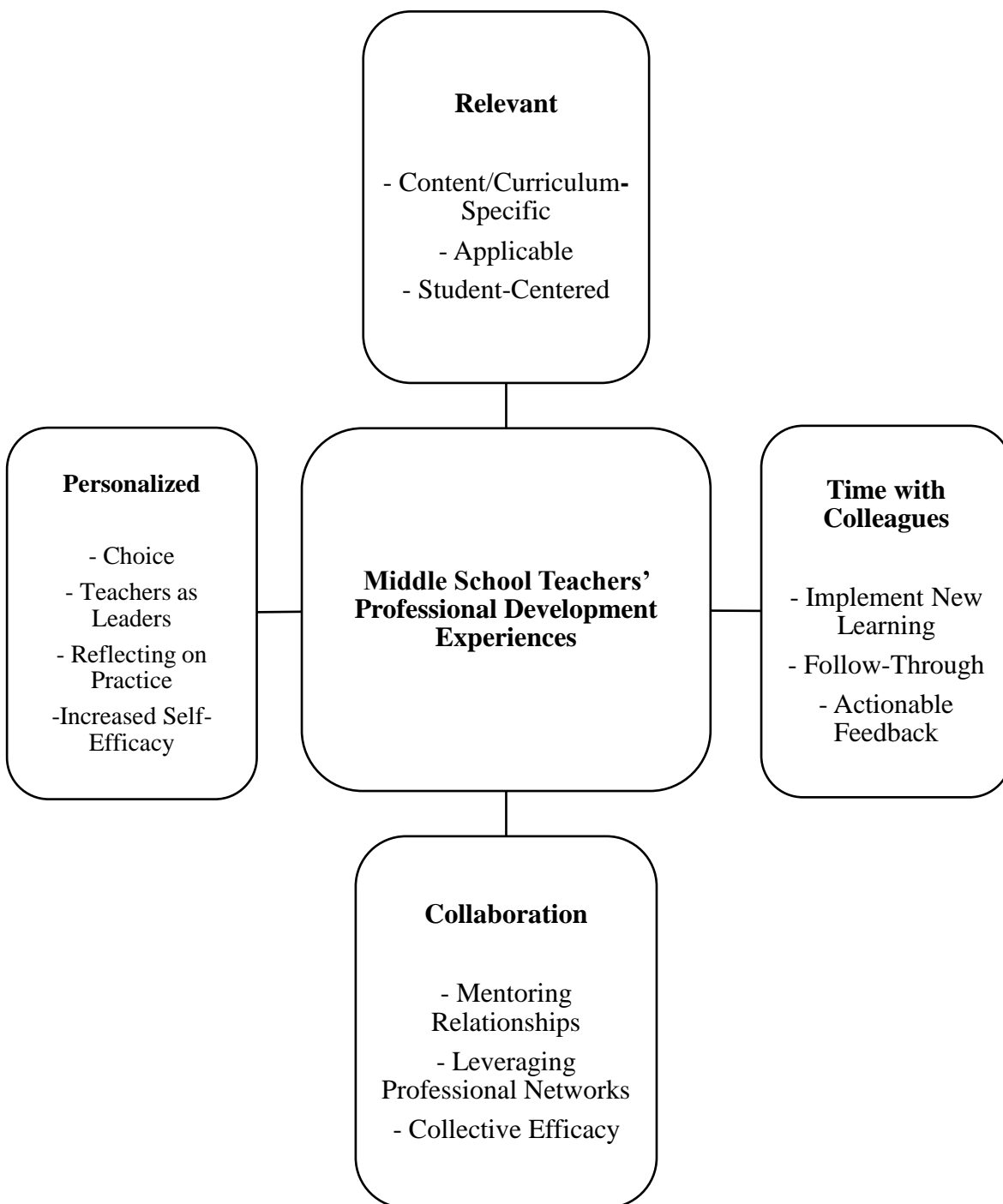
PD experience known as TESA, or Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement. The only other specific feedback, other than simple approvals from all participants, came from Daniel. He noted that all transcriptions were correct, but that he used more filler phrases and transitional statements to respond to the questions that he initially thought he had. The process of using member checks provided a way for the research participants to play an active role in the data gathered from their interviews. Additionally, the use of the written reflection as the third piece of data ensured that the researcher was able to triangulate the data for analysis.

Findings

The identification of common words or phrases in the data led to subthemes, which then contributed to identifying four themes that emerged throughout the coding process. The themes include *relevant*, *time with colleagues*, *collaboration*, and *personalized* (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Middle School Teachers' Professional Development Experiences



Note. Themes and Accompanying Subthemes.

Relevant

When analyzing responses from the interview questions that asked the participants to share their experiences with PD that have impacted their practice, common words and phrases were identified (Figure 1). Coding the data led to identifying the following subthemes which are content/curriculum-specific, applicable, and student-centered. The subthemes then led to the first theme titled *relevant*.

Content/Curriculum Specific. Reflecting on her learning that has been specific to content and curriculum, Paula, a middle school teacher with more than 15 years of experience said, “the professional developments that I think were the most beneficial were ones that pertain to what I was teaching.” Paula added that components of PD that led to changes in her practice include “definitely anything [named the content that she teaches] related.” Participants further discussed the importance of having content/curriculum-specific PD, especially when new standards are released, or when academic needs and strengths are pinpointed through assessment data analysis. Valerie, with over 20 years of experience, noted that PD has had an impact on her students’ academic growth when PD was intended to “add rigor to the content.” James, a teacher with over five years of teaching experience added that impactful training has included “professional development that has been specific to [his content] teachers, and geared toward new standards and how to implement those.” Bobbi, with more than ten years of middle school teaching experience, said, “professional development that I’ve had that affected my teaching the most was when we’ve had the vertical planning or vertical PD with our [content] teachers.” Vertical planning in the district has encompassed specific content work with teachers in grades 5-8, planning together to sequence the progression of each standard throughout middle school years. Valerie noted that “For me, the professional development that helped me become a

stronger teacher in my classroom [was pertaining to] my curriculum, specific to my curriculum.” Bobbi discussed that “My experiences with professional development have provided me with opportunities to learn new teaching practices. Professional development has provided new strategies and materials to implement those new concepts.” Sarah, who has over 15 years of experience said “I think the more I’ve gotten away from the standard textbook and tried different strategies, has brought about more interest.” Sarah reflected on her PD experience, stating, “I feel like [students’] learning is more in-depth and I feel like they have a better understanding of what we’re doing when the textbook is not the method that drives teaching and learning.” When applying learning from PD, Sarah sees, “more involvement for sure, because of some of those strategies, having them [students] read and annotate, we do more exploration rather than me always telling them.” The previous comments from the participants illustrated that the participants found PD to be more meaningful when it pertained to their curriculum and/or content area.

Applicable. The next subtheme under the theme of *relevant* points to the need for PD that is applicable to practice. Paula stated that “professional development that is hands-on that I can use in the classroom almost immediately is helpful so the information isn’t lost or forgotten.” Paula also reflected on her experiences saying she finds benefit in knowing, “this is what you learn, and this is why, and this is how it connects to standards.” Annie, with over 15 years of teaching experience in a middle school setting discussed PD that has been applicable to her teaching, saying “I love book studies in our district or in our building. Those really helped because even our principal is on board with and knows the same language as you.” To further support the need for PD to be applicable, Daniel, a teacher with more than five years of experience stated, “When I think about future professional developments, I like to see what

they're connected to and what the purpose is". Communicating with teachers as to the intent and goal of PD is something that Daniel feels is important, with him going on to say that he appreciates knowing "we are doing this so that it leads to the next thing, and then it's going to be assessed in some way."

Student-Centered. The last subtheme under *relevant* is student-centered. Of knowing students as individuals, Valerie shared that her students have benefitted from PD that "helped me reach the deep souls of my students, how to help them be better, emotionally, socially, physically, all those things that are needed before they can learn." When asked about PD experiences that have impacted his practice, Daniel stated that, "professional development that connects directly with students on a personal level or having time to think through how to apply professional development to specific students are probably the two biggest reasons that drive me to apply new learning." Sarah spoke to meeting the needs of students by keeping learning current stating that, "by implementing new ideas and strategies into the classroom on a regular basis, the student learning remains new and fresh instead of stagnant." She pointed out though this doesn't mean that "brand new lessons are used all the time, but implementing at least one new idea or strategy can positively impact how the students retain information." When asked about PD that contributes to her students' academic success, Paula noted that she feels her students benefit "anytime I grow my content or grow my knowledge base." Valerie stated, "I think any PD to help me stay current on technology, what opportunities are out there, I'm always open to that." The importance of knowing families and the community in which one teaches provided additional evidence for the subtheme of student-centered. Bobbi shared, "Family life is changing all the time in our country, in our communities. The kids are changing with technology and socially." Bobbi spoke to the need to evolve along with this knowledge stating that, "sometimes

you can get complacent with that. And I think sometimes that's a problem with teaching and teachers that we can get so complacent that we forget we have to change too and adapt.” Bobbi discussed this further saying, “we need to start with the question what do our kids need? And once we start with that question with our kids’ needs, our school or community, I think we’re going to have a greater impact.” Bobbi spoke more about knowing family and communities by suggesting that, “Parents come to some of the professional development so they would have some insight into what is applied in school.” Daniel also discussed the need to know families and community for the benefit of his students, pointing out that, “learning about childhood trauma, I have changed the way I discuss historical topics such as the mistreatment of different people groups.” He went to say, “I eliminated assignments that required students to look into their own family histories, as some students have suffered trauma from family members.”

When asked how PD could have more impact on her practice, Valerie said, “I think as I have more experience, I need less about my standards, my curriculum, I think I need more, how to help the different students who come into my room.” Valerie went on to talk more about meeting the needs of her students, discussing, “the life stories of some of our students, we can't even imagine. As a teacher, I need to serve those from different economics, different diversity, trauma. I would like more on that to help me in the classroom.” Annie also reflected on the importance of forming relationships with her students stating “in my practice with students and their learning, the best thing I did was get a middle-level educator’s certificate. That set me on the right foot to understand middle school students in their uniqueness.” She added to that thought by saying that she is “drawn toward experiences that help individualize the experience for kids in my classroom.” Bobbi shared that her recent PD hasn’t “necessarily been student-centered.” She discussed that PD is often “more of the curriculum and there’s nothing wrong

with that, but that doesn't necessarily directly impact the student." Bobbi reflected on the benefit of past PD that "was able to teach you how to interact with kids and challenging situations."

The subthemes above pointed to the need for PD that is *relevant*. Communicating such relevance of PD to the teachers was noted by Daniel, as he compared this to a teacher making sure their students know the relevancy of their learning. He stated, "It's like kids, they want to know what's relevant...what's the relevancy of what they're learning in the real world, and in our case as teachers, we want to know what exactly is the relevancy of this." Participants discussed the importance of PD which is *relevant* through the subthemes of content/curriculum-specific, applicable, and student-centered.

Time with Colleagues

The subthemes of implementing new learning, follow-through, and actionable feedback substantiate the next theme, *time with colleagues*. Figure 1 shows the connections from commonly used words or phrases in the data to the subthemes and the theme.

Implement New Learning. The first subtheme that emerged in the data for *time with colleagues* was that of having time provided to implement new learning. Annie shared that she needs PD to provide "time with colleagues to process things that are changing that we might need to address." Sarah commented, "I'm challenged to find the time to upgrade everything that I do to the [new technology] platform...just finding the time to do it and really do it well is my biggest challenge right now." She went to say, "I understand the program, I'm learning a lot. I like it. But I'm not sure I have enough time to really do it justice." Annie shared her ideas on having time to implement new learning saying, "right now, technology in the classroom level would be very helpful for me and my students. More time to practice with that." Sarah reflected further on having time to implement new learning stating, "When you try something new and

you start completely over, you almost feel like a new teacher and you're building from scratch.”

Bobbi reflected on a year-long PD process noting, “I felt like this was the most effective professional development we’ve had because it was a year-long process. We would meet monthly to discuss how we were implementing the various concepts into our teaching.” Paula also discussed the need for time stating “I need professional development to improve on what I have. I also need the time. Give me the afternoon to show how I’m going to implement that into the classroom and how it’s actually going to affect students.” Paula also reflected on her experiences stating, “I just need time to process, to organize, to know what it’s going to look like. I like professional developments that say, hear you go, now go and work on it. Then you can process what you did.” Paula added to that thought on new learning from PD stating that “when you have time to process, then you can make it applicable to you.”

Follow-Through. The next subtheme that emerged under the theme of *time with colleagues* was that of making time for follow-through. Paula discussed that “I find value in any professional development that is followed up on. I think it is important, not only if I learn, but if people around me, coworkers, and administration are invested as well.” Paula went on to note that inaction in her classroom could stem from, “when we get new PD and everyone is excited and motivated to start or implement something, then it’s forgotten and there isn’t any follow-up.” Paula also noted the lack of time for follow-through stating, “We’ll learn something new and then go on and it’s forgotten. I lose my excitement for all PD and am apprehensive to implement because it will be gone within a year or even a week.” To avoid this happening, Paula offered a solution stating, “If we are taking time away from students to have PD, we need to make it meaningful and have follow up and follow through.” Bobbi also discussed follow-through on new learning stating, “there are some instances where follow through with professional

development has not been present.” She went on to say “this makes it difficult to have sustainability with the concept being applied in class.” One additional piece of follow-through discussed by Daniel was accountability and the part that plays in ensuring that new learning is being attempted and implemented equitably. Daniel stated, “Most of the professional development is tied to a goal, but there’s also been some that where the school sees a need of professional development that they’ve found to be beneficial, then that’s kind of thrown in.” He went on to say that “some of those professional developments have been good. We have this development event, but we don’t know what else to do after that, there’s no follow-up or evaluation.” Daniel concluded his thoughts by noting, “PD is not usually assessed. We don’t assess the impact of professional development on the students.”

Actionable Feedback. The next subtheme that emerged under the theme of *time with colleagues* was the importance of receiving actionable feedback on the implementation of new learning. Daniel spoke about actionable feedback, stating that, “If we are learning how to do some sort of function as teachers within the classroom, having that time where teachers actually practice the things they're learning with other teachers and then get feedback on how they're doing.” Daniel explained further by stating that “you practice it as if you're in your own classroom, doing whatever it is that you're learning how to do.” Bobbi also discussed the benefits of receiving feedback, stating “when they [content coach] did come into the classroom and they were co-teaching or coaching, and then gave you feedback that really helped me have more confidence, the ability to try other things.” Bobbi added, “Getting insight and a little bit of constructive criticism was motivation to try to just do better.”

The theme of *time with colleagues* was evident throughout the participant discussions in the first subtheme of having time to implement new learning, which was reflected above through

a variety of suggestions by the participants that would support them in this area. The next subtheme of making time for follow-through was noted by participants as a way for them to ensure that enough time is devoted to successfully implementing professional development into their practice. Finally, the subtheme of providing actionable feedback was noted as a needed tool for continued growth as teachers, and was the last subtheme contributing to the theme of *time with colleagues*.

Collaboration

The theme of *collaboration* takes into account subthemes including mentoring relationships, leveraging professional networks, and collective efficacy. Figure 1 represents the common words or phrases in the data, linking them to the subthemes, and then to the theme of how PD supports teachers in *collaboration*.

Mentoring Relationships. The first subtheme that led to the theme of *collaboration* was that of mentoring relationships and valuing colleagues as resources. Annie provided detail about the importance of teachers mentoring one another, stating, “Maybe have someone come in and team-teach it with you. You know, a colleague teaming together with you would be good.” She went on to reflect, “We have a lot of new things coming on, but the most effective so far is when we've had some time to work with other colleagues on it. And I think that would impact my students very much.” Annie further noted, “the hardest thing for teachers is teaching in front of other teachers.” Even though observations may be somewhat difficult at the onset, Annie went on to say “I think it's totally fine to bring an outside observer in to see how the whole staff's doing it, but much more effective to have your colleagues come in and participate.” To grow professionally from this experience, Annie feels that, “all you'd have to ask them is which things the teacher is doing that were working the best, wouldn't even have to get into what you're doing

wrong.” When asked about how PD has had an impact on her growth as a teacher, Sarah replied, “I think using colleagues as professional resources and helpers is huge. And I think too many people don’t do that.” Sarah also noted that “going to professional development is one thing, but I think I learned early on from some veteran teachers that in order to implement what you learn at professional development, you have to be willing to take risks.” Fostering mentoring relationships with her colleagues as resources is one thing that has enabled Sarah to feel confident in taking risks, evidenced by her noting that one should, “use resources around you when risks don’t work because it might just be how you presented the lesson or the strategy.” To further expand on the idea of mentoring relationships and working with colleagues, James explained that “I feel motivated...to try some things with students, with your group, whoever it is...they can help you decide whether these things are having a positive impact.” James discussed the importance of having colleagues as resources and how important it has been to his teaching to “have that support system that you know, it’ll be OK if it doesn’t go perfectly, or help you decide how to alter things.”

Leveraging Professional Networks. The next subtheme under the theme of *collaboration* was leveraging professional networks, using the expertise of colleagues, whether they are in-district or outside. James stated, “I think districts should really encourage their employees to take advantage of PD provided outside of the district.” James expanded on this by stating, “It seems like the shift has been from...whole district professional development to more individual choice.” James went on to note that, “it seems like there's been more [PD] opportunities especially as things have gone virtual, and I hope that you'll maybe not even just at a state level, we can do stuff more like that even at a national level.” He described a possible scenario with professionals from across the country that may encompass, “talking with middle

school teachers or maybe specifically [his content] teachers throughout the country and there's visual format would be really powerful.” Reflecting on PD from a wider lens back to the district lens, James added “I have gotten stuff out of district professional development, but it seems like the further I've branched out to a wider net the professional development is catching, it seems like I get a lot more out of it.” Sarah also discussed the role that technology plays in leveraging professional networks, stating that “I feel that social media has changed professional development from a once a month experience to a daily one.” Expanding further on the use of technology as a vehicle for professional learning, Sarah added that technology “allows teachers like myself to connect and learn from other professionals on a daily basis.” Of new ways to interact with other professionals, Sarah discussed that she likes “some of the newer things like Twitter, and being able to follow different people and learn different ideas on your own.” She concluded her thoughts on the role technology plays in her own PD experiences by stating, “It used to be, you'd just sit there and wait for professional development and have a class and then implement it. Now I can find stuff daily and search for things as I go.”

Collective Efficacy. Collective efficacy is the next subtheme discussed within the theme of *collaboration*. Collective efficacy is having a group of professionals with a shared belief that they can impact the success of students. The importance of forming relationships with colleagues was discussed by Sarah, as she noted, “the most impactful professional developments for me included connections with other teachers.” She added “I found myself inspired by certain ideas and strategies that other teachers used. Even the attitude and energy some teachers exuded in their classrooms made me want to improve my teaching style, relationships with students, knowledge of the content.” Informal conversations and communication among teachers can also help to build collective efficacy by allowing teachers to learn from each other. James shared, “I

think in general, if the professional development allows more discussion, usually in smaller groups, I think that is always pretty meaningful.” James stated, “teachers tend to be a little bit more honest and vulnerable...and I think at those times that's really when your self-efficacy is going to improve.” James went on stating, “If you're in a PD and it's just kind of this blanket presentation that you're sitting through, usually not with a lot of time for reflection, I think it really is those smaller group discussions that have increased it [efficacy] the most.”

The theme of *collaboration* came through in the data as participants discussed the importance of mentoring relationships, which were identified as integral to professional growth by the participants. Leveraging professional networks, the next subtheme under *collaboration*, emerged in the data as suggestions and positive ways that multiple networks can impact practice. Finally, the last subtheme of collective efficacy was identified as the participants in the study spoke to increased collective efficacy in education as a direct result of *collaboration*.

Personalized

The next theme that emerged from the data was that of PD opportunities that are *personalized* or tailored to each teacher’s needs. Subthemes included choice, teachers as leaders, reflecting on practice, and increased self-efficacy. The data around these subthemes are provided in Figure 1 where commonly used words or phrases in the data were linked to each subtheme, supporting the theme.

Choice. The first subtheme was that of choice. Bobbi shared her experiences with PD in the past saying, “there’s been the design where we’ve had the menu days [choices of sessions] to have that option. I think that’s huge because I think so often teachers feel that they have to do something because the district is telling them.” Bobbi shared that having the “autonomy to make choices and to decide what’s best has been very beneficial to myself and to others because

there's certain aspects of our classroom with them all being different that we need to focus on."

Bobbi went on to say that "by providing that option, it allows us to kind of look at our weaknesses and grow from it. So I think those are the ones that I think most people appreciate and probably get the most out of." Valerie spoke to the idea of *personalized* PD stating that "I think everyone comes into PD at different ages, with different experience, and with different subjects." Valerie also pointed out that teachers may have a "totally different attitude" than others on what they hope to gain from PD. Annie described how she would navigate the challenge of teachers having different expectations of PD saying, "if it were up to me, we would recognize that teachers are at a different point in their careers and think about what teachers might need. There should be experiences that are tailored to teacher request." Choice was discussed by others including Sarah who said, "Giving more choices and still continuing professional development would be beneficial." Bobbi shared that she thought it is important to listen to what teachers need stating, "I'd like to think that any teacher, as long as their concerns are being heard and then seeing if there's a way to fit that within a PD, that concerns are being expressed to administrators or other teachers." Paula also indicated that having choice in PD topics is beneficial saying, "this is important in my classroom. This is what I'm going to do, this is what I want to learn. If you asked me, what are you interested in, the idea of being asked is huge." Sarah discussed the potentially harmful effects of not seeking teacher input on PD saying, "I think stifling professionals by pushing them into one way only instead of giving options, is not nearly as beneficial as offering some choices and really letting them challenge themselves."

James also discussed choice in PD by stating that "having the ability to choose sessions that you think are really going to help your teaching and the students is a big factor." He continued, "I think a lot of times when teachers are required to go to something, maybe it takes away a little bit

of personal touch.” Sarah stated, “My ideal professional development is that everyone would be excited and want to try new things...the attitude is right, the willingness is there, but since we can't control that, I like the idea of letting teachers choose different paths.” Sarah went on to say that, “as a building and as a district, you have to have goals too. Having all your teachers in the same direction helps, but offering choices is important because I think sometimes I've felt kind of stifled in professional development.” Sarah discussed the limits of PD saying, “I've always gotten good things out of it, but I don't think as much as I could have if I could have chosen my own path or my own topic.”

Teachers as Leaders. The next subtheme within the theme of *personalized PD* was teachers as leaders. Annie discussed that she felt more of an investment in PD when existing teacher expertise could be honored, pointing out the benefits of “sending our representatives, our teaching staff to see a speaker and learn those methods in person.” Annie shared this as a need because such practices of late have “been sourced out rather than having the teachers get it as a primary source and work together and meet other colleagues from other districts.” Impacts on Valerie’s growth as a teacher included her being called on to share her expertise. She discussed that she has grown as a teacher when administrators, “have come to me and pushed me, not me just as one of the staff, the admin who have sought me out for [my training experiences].” Valerie also recalls feeling that her expertise has been valued when she has been asked, “would you pilot this strategy and then come back and let me know?” She noted that “those were definitely the best ones that I feel I personally benefitted from.” Valerie later went on to say that her ideal professional development would “let people recognize what it is they need and give credit for the work they’re doing on their own. I think every staff has a lot of people that could be teaching others that we don’t take advantage of.” Paula had similar thoughts stating, “I think

leadership positions and opportunities would be helpful.” James discussed what he needs from PD stating, “What would be nice is to have some sort of leadership professional development, things that you could be doing that are beneficial for the district as a whole.”

Reflecting on Practice. The next subtheme within the theme of *personalized* was that of reflecting on practice. Participants discussed reflection in different ways. Thinking about the mindset that is required for PD to be impactful, Paula stated that “you can do tons of professional development, you can have all this knowledge, but until you actually put it into practice, it doesn’t really matter.” James added more thoughts on what it takes for PD to impact practice stating, “I’ve been exposed to a lot of PD and sometimes I feel frustrated with myself that I haven’t implemented more in the classroom.” He went on to explain that, “I could definitely be doing better based on everything that I’ve learned in professional development. It’s a learning experience, you go through a professional development, and how to actually make those meaningful in your classroom.” James also described his growth as a teacher commenting that, “working with those other teachers and the people that have been leading [a] program...really makes you reflect on your teaching, are you really reaching all of your students?” When asked to describe his growth as a teacher based on experiences with PD, Daniel stated that, “no matter what the professional development is, the simple fact of being forced to self-reflect is probably the biggest thing for me as a professional.” He added, “I look at myself and think, here's this thing I'm learning, have I been doing this? If not, how can I? Or am I doing it well, am I assessing my student's learning or the impact on them?” Bobbi stated that “PD encourages us to continue to grow as learners and look for the best practices that are out there because our students are changing every year.” Bobbi added, “we need to keep up with them and we need to find what's going to motivate them and engage them in their learning...that's what professional

development continues to do for us moving forward.” Paula also provided thoughts on the value of teachers taking on the role of the learner by stating that, “You always have to grow and as a teacher, you’re always the learner and if you don’t embrace that learning, it’s kind of hard to have your students embrace that learning.” Paula added, “You’re always growing, you’re always going to latch onto something else and hopefully improve what you’ve been doing.” Paula concluded her thoughts on reflection by pointing out that,

I know I need to reflect, but unless I am given the time to reflect, it’s one of the first things that doesn’t get done. I’ve improved my curriculum, teaching, attitude, classroom management, and increased skills to encourage engagement throughout the years. All from different professional developments.

Increased Self-Efficacy. The next subtheme under *personalized* was that of increased self-efficacy. Sarah shared how PD could have a more significant impact on her efficacy as a teacher stating “I feel I have progressed where I know what I want to work on and where I want to go, where five years ago, or in early in my career, 10 years ago, I would have needed more direction.” Sarah spoke about her growth stating “I feel like now just having professional development where I have time to go out and find what I need and try to implement it and contact other teachers, teachers who have been using a certain thing that I’m looking at.” Bobbi also spoke about her growth saying, “to be honest, I think that my growth has been based on my motivation to continue to find PD on my own.” Bobbi, considering both formal and informal PD, said, “Anytime you’re learning something from others in different environments, different settings, and situations, it helps you grow as a teacher.” Looking deeper into how PD has impacted her self-efficacy, Bobbi went on to say that, “I think reading about what other teachers are doing, you can reflect upon what you’re doing and compare and contrast and see what’s

working best.” Bobbi concluded this thought by stating, “If that idea works and you have success, it just does build the confidence and helps your ability to maybe try things a little bit more often go beyond your comfort zone with what you're doing in class.” Paula added comments on confidence as a teacher noting, “I think there’s strong professional development that builds confidence in what I’m doing, because I practice it, now I can do it.” Sarah talked about her self-efficacy stating, “I think that combination of learning more through professional development and implementing it as I teach has definitely made me more confident and comfortable in my abilities as a teacher.” Sarah shared more about how PD has made an impact on her saying, “I know it would probably be hard to separate that from just teaching experience, but it’s hard to imagine that I would have made the same progress without [PD]. I just don’t think I would have.” She also voiced her belief that her increased self-efficacy has been able to offer support to others saying, “I think it’s made me more, at least confident enough to feel comfortable, helping others. She continued, “Sharing my own strategies that I use and things that I learned with other teachers, which again, I don’t think I would’ve done without seeing other people do it and experiencing it that same way.”

The theme of *personalized* PD came through in the data as participants shared the importance of choice, the first subtheme, where the participants identified ways for PD to be more meaningful for each individual. In the second subtheme, participants discussed the positive impacts of utilizing teachers as PD leaders, and how that could support veteran teachers who are prepared to share their knowledge with others. Reflecting on practice was the next subtheme that emerged, evidencing the thought process that the participants participate in regularly as they continually seek ways to improve their practice. Finally, increased self-efficacy was the last

subtheme identified as an outcome of PD that is *personalized*, and that directly impacted the practice of the participants.

Summary

The narrative inquiry approach highlighted the rich content in the storied experiences of seven middle school teachers as they reflected on their experiences with PD. Subthemes were named from commonly used words or phrases that were identified by the researcher by carefully analyzing the data using an analysis spiral (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The identified subthemes addressed the central question of how middle school teachers describe their experiences with PD and ultimately led to four overall themes.

The first theme includes middle school teachers identifying *relevant* PD components, including the subthemes of PD that is content/curriculum-specific, applicable, and student-centered. The next theme that emerged from the data analysis is that of *time with colleagues*, with subthemes of implement new learning, follow-through, and actionable feedback. The third theme is *collaboration*, including subthemes of mentoring relationships, leveraging professional networks, and collective efficacy. The fourth theme is *personalized* PD, with subthemes of choice, teachers as leaders, reflecting on practice, and increased self-efficacy. Chapter 5 includes a summary of the study, as well as conclusions, discussion, and recommendations.

CHAPTER 5

Summary, Conclusions, Discussion, and Recommendations

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to obtain a better understanding of professional development based on teachers' perceptions of their past professional development experiences and how those experiences impacted their professional practice. Bayar (2014) writes that schools traditionally provide professional development to help in-service teachers grow as professionals. To better understand the impact of PD on teachers' professional growth, this study examined the experiences of a group of teachers from one middle school in an upper Midwest state. Chapter five includes a summary of the study, conclusions, a discussion of the findings, and recommendations for practice and further study.

Summary of the Study

Professional development for teachers has been defined as a wide variety of specialized training, formal education, or advanced professional learning intended to help administrators, teachers, and other educators improve their professional knowledge, competence, skills, and effectiveness (Ed Glossary, 2013). Effective PD focuses on content area material, and the modeling of teaching strategies specific to the content, and is most effective when aligned to school goals (Demonte, 2013). These areas provide directed and effective support for teachers of varying levels of experience and skillsets when modeling and content are the focus. Demonte (2013) also noted that active learning and collaboration with continuous feedback were often identified as effective elements of teacher PD. Stewart (2014) found that PD efforts are maximized when educators are encouraged to play an active role in their learning, and when they work together toward a common goal. Stewart's review of the literature also determined the

importance of PD focused on what a teacher chooses to study, how they study, and with whom they study.

Rebore (2015) discussed traditional approaches, often known as teacher in-service training, where effectiveness was limited because such training represented changes being imposed on schools and teachers and that no real needs of the educational organization were being addressed. Rebore (2015) goes on to discuss more recent shifts in teacher learning, since the early 2000s, often center on the goal of producing effective instruction. One such evolution in teacher PD has been that of moving past providing teachers with content knowledge to that of assisting in the development of teachers' identities as professionals. To foster the development of teachers' professional identities, involving them in the learning process increases the impact of PD on practice. Camburn (2015) discussed the importance of engaging teachers in the meaningful work of planning professional development suggesting that inserting this practice may have a higher likelihood of fostering changes that improve practice. However, it is common for district-planned training to fit the needs of the school or district, but not necessarily the needs of individual teachers. This, according to Soine and Lump (2014), is a crucial component to examine and subsequently, alter practice.

Teacher collaboration has also been seen in the form of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Recent research on PLCs suggests the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for teachers, moving from interest to commitment (DuFour et al., 2016). PLCs include the integration of time for collaboration within a school to allow specialty area teachers, classroom teachers, and grade-level supervisors to meet regularly to ensure high levels of learning for all students (DuFour, 2004). The concept of PLCs has evolved over the years, with one model by DuFour (2004) identifying four key components to

consider when analyzing a PLC including 1) a focus on learning; 2) a collaborative culture, including shared beliefs, values, and vision, and an atmosphere of trust and respect; 3) a focus on results and; 4) a commitment to continuous improvement and hard work. According to DuFour (2004), one method for increasing collaboration in schools is by observing one another, which can serve as a compelling way to share techniques and build collaborative relationships, thereby enhancing professional learning. Van Clay et al. (2011) describes the strategic responsibilities of implementing a collaborative culture, which includes the use of common vocabulary among teachers, taking responsibility for every student in every class, accessing current research, analyzing data to improve learning, and regularly observing the best practice instruction of others, and providing rich collaborative learning experiences for teachers.

In a qualitative study, Shaffer and Brown (2015) determined that teamwork between the teachers was essential for the success of PD. In a qualitative study, Chong and Kong (2012) examined collaboration through the analysis of teacher discussions, field notes, journal recordings, and interviews. The results found that teacher collaboration improved content knowledge and application of new pedagogy, expanded scaffolding of ideas, increased inspiration to create new innovative practices relying on goal-driven lesson design, and added opportunities to reflect (Chong & Kong, 2012).

How teachers engage in PD has been shown to impact their practice. According to Shaha and Ellsworth (2013), teachers need training to continually improve their teaching practices. The driving research question behind Shaha and Ellsworth's quantitative study was whether schools with higher utilization of engagement in on-demand online professional development experienced a more significant impact on student achievement than those with lower utilization or engagement. Areas studied included participation and engagement, student performance, and

other measures of school- and educator-related success. Following two years of analyzing usage of on-demand online PD, Shaha and Ellsworth (2013) found substantiated significant advantages to the impact of professional development as well as indicating that the higher utilizers achieved significantly greater gains in student achievement. While this study points to the impact that regular, effective PD has on student achievement, there remains a need to explore how customized PD for each teacher may also positively affect student achievement.

How teachers engage with PD has been shown to impact student achievement. The link between teacher PD and student achievement is more evident when PD is focused on a specific instructional strategy and consistently monitored throughout an instructional period, resulting in positive student gains (Yrtseven & Altun, 2016). Teacher practice is improved when teachers work together and when they examine their practice reflectively. Teachers' abilities to reflect can be determined and then improved through observations and providing experiences for reflection (Kayapinar, 2016). Support for reflecting on practice leads to more highly qualified teachers (Kayapinar, 2016).

Teacher self-efficacy is impacted in part by their attitude toward PD and their willingness to improve their own learning. In a study on teachers' attitudes towards professional development, archival data from 1,120 schools in Kentucky were examined to determine if there was any relationship between teachers' attitudes towards professional development and school performance. Yuejin (2016) used the 2013 Kentucky Teaching, Empowering, Leading, and Learning (TELL) survey data and the 2013 school accountability profile data from the Kentucky Department of Education (Yuejin, 2016). Focused on teacher perceptions, the study aimed to contribute to an understanding of PD that leads to improved student learning. The study found that teachers' attitudes towards their professional development significantly predicted the

schools' overall performance at the elementary and middle school levels (Yuejin, 2016). Yuejin (2016) found that a key predicting variable was that of encouraging teachers to reflect on their practice. Kaniuka (2012) also discussed the interconnectedness of teacher expectations and efficacy, stating that they are interrelated to such a degree that as efficacy changes, so do the expectations that teachers have of themselves and their students. According to Kaniuka (2012), advancing through professional identities happens by taking part in professional activities.

Teachers' experiences with professional development is a topic in need of research. Uncovering such information about teachers' experiences with professional development sheds light on the types of PD they see as the most impactful. To better meet teachers' needs, professional development becomes a critical topic that warranted exploration. In this study, interviews and written reflections provided relevant data in which to recommend a future course of action. This study is significant as it offers school leaders a view of one upper Midwest rural school district's middle school teachers' perceptions of professional development. This study sought to provide a better understanding of teachers' perceptions of professional development.

Methodology

This study was guided by a central question and sub-questions. The central question was how do middle school teachers describe their experiences with professional development. Supporting sub-questions probed further by seeking to know how experiences with PD led to teachers making changes in their classroom. Teachers responded to sub-questions intended to identify individual learning needs, their involvement in PD, the impact PD has had on the self-efficacy of teachers, and finally about the impact of PD on the success and academic growth of students.

This qualitative study used a narrative inquiry design to seek input from middle school teachers about their experiences with professional development (PD). Narrative inquiry involves the process of gathering information for research through storytelling. The use of narrative inquiry supports gathering data in the form of participants' descriptions of their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interview items support the central question and the sub-questions, while the participants' responses to the interview items provided the data to be analyzed by the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Multiple types of data gathering instruments were used including semi-structured interviews, reflective writing artifacts, and follow-up interviews. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), narrative inquiry is useful for this type of research because researchers use participants' stories or lived experiences as the data. In this study, the researcher employed triangulation strategies through the use of these multiple, yet related, sources of data collection. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) discuss that utilizing multiple sources of data to triangulate the information gathered in qualitative research means comparing and cross-checking data to increase credibility and validity. This study examined teachers' perceptions of professional development through an analysis of their experiences with PD, providing a way for their experiences, their stories, to be represented as the data with which the researcher formed recommendations for future practice.

A pilot study was conducted using a similar qualitative approach. Each participant in the pilot study was interviewed, and the researcher transcribed the data. Once the data was analyzed, seven themes emerged. The themes included that teachers should: 1) have a voice in the process of planning PD, 2) operate from clearly articulated goals, 3) collaborate, 4) have access to content-specific training, 5) be engaged in their learning, 6) have access to PD that is systematic and sustained over time, and 7) receive PD that is *relevant* and applicable to practice. Following

the completion of the pilot study, the research questions and the interview items were edited and refined to allow the full study to uncover more of the participants' experiences with professional development. Expanding the study to include more interview items allowed the researcher to examine the practice of PD through a lens that paints a more comprehensive picture and doesn't simply seek to discuss what needs to improve. Rather, participants' whole experiences with professional development were examined.

The participants in this study included middle school classroom teachers from one upper Midwestern rural district who had more than two years of experience in the school where the study took place. Seven teachers participated in the study. Individual interviews were conducted and all interviews were recorded and transcribed. A written transcript of each interview was given back to the participant to review for accuracy which is a strategy known as respondent validation, or member checks (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The process of respondent validation, or the use of member checks, ensured that the meaning of the participants' responses was not misinterpreted. Validity in qualitative research involves how research findings match reality, and reliability entails reconciling whether or not the results of the study are consistent with the data collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The use of member checks, or taking initial data back to the participants to check that the transcript matches their responses, aided in ensuring valid and reliable data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data collection and analysis in qualitative research should be a simultaneous process, as the researcher is uncovering information as the research is conducted (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In keeping with this practice, participants responded to written reflection prompts (Appendix B), which served as the second piece of data, specifically asking how PD led to changes in the participants' classrooms, led to inaction in the participant's classrooms, and how PD led to

changes in their teaching. These written reflections were collected during a second interview. The second set of interview items (Appendix C) were developed to inquire further into the participants' experiences with PD. These items were developed based on the analysis of the first set of interview data with the intention of probing deeper into participants' experiences with professional development and asked questions that caused teachers to reflect on how PD impacted their self-efficacy as teachers, and how PD affected student achievement. The second interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Participants were given an opportunity to view the transcript from their interview and provide feedback. The initial interview, the written reflection, and the second interview made up the three points of data analyzed in this study.

This study followed the data analysis spiral discussed by Creswell and Poth (2018). The first step was to begin organizing and managing the data. This was followed by reading and memoing emergent ideas, describing and classifying codes into themes, developing and assessing interpretations, representing and visualizing the data, and the final step included an account of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To organize and manage the data, the researcher prepared the interview files by assigning pseudonyms to participants and storing the initial recordings on a secure server. The second analysis step involved reviewing transcribed data and reviewing reflective comments which were added to the margins of the transcription. During this phase of reading and memoing emergent ideas, the researcher read and re-read the data, beginning to highlight common words and phrases, as well as identifying major ideas throughout the data. This process of memoing multiple times enabled the researcher to track the development of ideas through the process, thereby lending credibility to the analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The next phase of analysis was that of describing and classifying codes into themes. Taking the ideas that emerged

during the memoing phase, the researcher began to identify codes in the data. Through first cycle or initial coding, common words or phrases were examined and organized into categories (Tracy, 2012). Codes were then organized both as descriptive or summarizing participant language into common words or short themes. Creswell and Poth (2018) write that “The process of coding is central to qualitative research and involves making sense of the text collected from interviews, observations, and documents” (p. 190). A process of coding or identifying similar aspects within the information enabled the data to be referred to and retrieved specifically for their commonalities (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

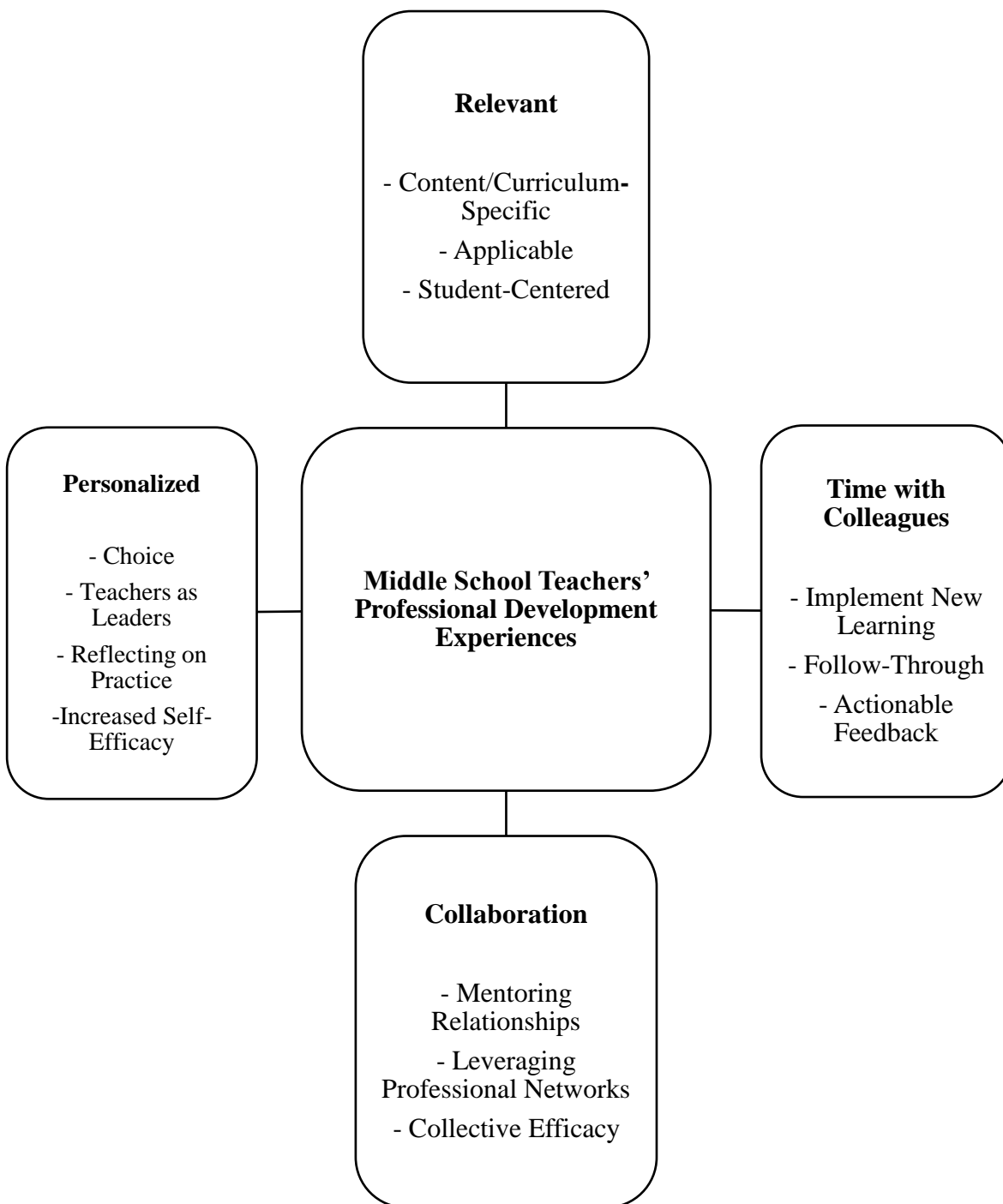
For second-level coding, the researcher went beyond the *what* in the data and looked for the *why* and *how* in the initial codes (Tracy, 2012). These findings helped to support the explanation of the patterns that emerged, and in this case, were informed by the written reflections after the first interview. For this second level or axial coding, themes were organized into a smaller number of subthemes or broad units of information around a common idea and then expanded on by using a detailed narrative description. The use of detailed description was provided within the setting of each participant and calls for the author to describe what they see in the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The next phase in Creswell and Poth’s (2018) data analysis spiral is that of developing and assessing interpretations. During this phase, emerging themes from the categories resulted in contextual understandings and theories that enabled the researcher to clearly articulate the emerging themes, which ultimately informs the research findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The researcher reflected on the steps taken to develop codes, form subthemes, and then organized subthemes into themes to make sense of the data. This process led to lessons learned and the interpretations from the researcher. For the final step of data analysis, the researcher

represented the data visually to compare and cross-reference categories to show the picture of the data, and to again show how the identified codes were reduced to themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To create the visual representation, the researcher revisited the data once again, checking that the text went beyond a descriptive summary and offered conclusions.

Findings

Common words and phrases (codes) led to the development of subthemes. These subthemes were grouped into the following four themes: *relevant*, *time with colleagues*, *collaboration*, and *personalized* (Figure 1).

Figure 1*Middle School Teachers' Professional Development Experiences*

Note. Themes and Accompanying Subthemes.

Relevant

The first theme, *relevant*, was identified through the following three subthemes: 1) PD that is content/curriculum-specific, 2) PD that is applicable, and 3) PD that is student-centered.

Content/Curriculum Specific. Participant data showed a strong correlation between how the participants felt about the impact of PD on their practice when it directly related to the content or the curriculum that applied to them. Demonte (2013) found that effective PD focuses on core content, or content area material, and the modeling of teaching strategies specific to the content. Reflecting on her learning that has been specific to content and curriculum, Paula, a middle school teacher with more than 15 years of experience said, “the professional developments that I think were the most beneficial were ones that pertain to what I was teaching.” Paula added that components of PD that led to changes in her practice include “definitely anything [named the content that she teaches] related.” Valerie, with over 20 years of experience noted that “For me, the professional development that helped me become a stronger teacher in my classroom [was pertaining to] my curriculum, specific to my curriculum.”

Applicable. The next subtheme under the theme of *relevant* points to the need for PD that is applicable to practice. Paula stated that “professional development that is hands-on that I can use in the classroom almost immediately is helpful so the information isn’t lost or forgotten.” Paula also reflected on her experiences saying she finds benefit in knowing, “this is what you learn, and this is why, and this is how it connects to standards.” To further support the need for PD to be applicable, Daniel, a teacher with more than five years of experience stated, “When I think about future professional developments, I like to see what they’re connected to and what the purpose is”. Communicating with teachers as to the intent and goal of PD is something that

Daniel feels is important, with him going on to say that he appreciates knowing “we are doing this so that it leads to the next thing, and then it’s going to be assessed in some way.”

Student-Centered. The last subtheme under *relevant* is student-centered. Of knowing students as individuals, Valerie shared that her students have benefitted from PD that “helped me reach the deep souls of my students, how to help them be better, emotionally, socially, physically, all those things that are needed before they can learn.” When asked about PD experiences that have impacted his practice, Daniel stated that, “professional development that connects directly with students on a personal level or having time to think through how to apply professional development to specific students are probably the two biggest reasons that drive me to apply new learning.” Participants valued genuine relationships with their students and had positive things to say about their experiences with PD that helped to strengthen those relationships. These three subthemes all supported the naming of *relevant* as a theme that emerged from the data.

Time with Colleagues

The theme of *time with colleagues* was identified through the following subthemes: 1) having *time* to implement new learning, 2) need for follow-through, and 3) actionable feedback.

Implement New Learning. The first subtheme that emerged in the data for *time with colleagues* was that of having time provided to implement new learning. Allocating time for teachers to be able to implement new practices is important (Steeg & Lambson, 2015). Participants offered examples of when time has been an invaluable resource for them to be able to effectively implement learning from PD. Annie shared that she needs PD to provide “time with colleagues to process things that are changing that we might need to address.” Paula also discussed the need for time stating “I need professional development to improve on what I have.

I also need the time. Give me the afternoon to show how I'm going to implement that into the classroom and how it's actually going to affect students."

Follow-Through. The next subtheme under *time with colleagues* pointed to a need for follow-through. Participants provided data that supports having additional time, beyond a PD experience, to ensure that the new learning has the potential to be sustained. Specifically, Paula discussed that "I find value in any professional development that is followed up on. I think it is important, not only if I learn, but if people around me, coworkers, and administration are invested as well." Paula also noted the lack of time for follow-through stating, "We'll learn something new and then go on and it's forgotten. I lose my excitement for all PD and am apprehensive to implement because it will be gone within a year or even a week." To avoid this happening, Paula offered a solution stating, "If we are taking time away from students to have PD, we need to make it meaningful and have follow up and follow through."

Actionable Feedback. The third subtheme identified under the theme of *time with colleagues* showed the need for actionable feedback as teachers work to implement learning from PD. Daniel spoke about actionable feedback stating, "If we are learning how to do some sort of function as teachers within the classroom, having that time where teachers actually practice the things they're learning with other teachers and then get feedback on how they're doing." Bobbi also discussed the benefits of receiving feedback stating, "when they [content coach] did come into the classroom and they were co-teaching or coaching, and then gave you feedback that really helped me have more confidence, the ability to try other things." Bobbi added, "Getting insight and a little bit of constructive criticism was motivation to try to just do better."

Collaboration

The next theme that emerged from the data was *collaboration*. The benefits to teachers collaborating include improved content knowledge and application of new pedagogy expanded scaffolding of ideas, increased inspiration to create new innovative practices relying on goal-driven lesson design, and additional opportunities to reflect. Within this study, the subthemes merged into *collaboration* include; 1) PD that fosters mentoring relationships, 2) PD that allows for leveraging professional networks, and 3) PD that contributes to increased collective efficacy among teachers.

Mentoring Relationships. The first subtheme that led to the theme of *collaboration* was that of mentoring relationships and valuing colleagues as resources. When asked about how PD has had an impact on her growth as a teacher, Sarah, who had more than 15 years of experience replied, “I think using colleagues as professional resources and helpers is huge. And I think too many people don’t do that.” To further expand on the idea of mentoring relationships and working with colleagues, James, who had more than 5 years of experience, explained that “I feel motivated...to try some things with students, with your group, whoever it is...they can help you decide whether these things are having a positive impact.”

Leveraging Professional Networks. The next subtheme under the theme of *collaboration* was leveraging professional networks, using the expertise of colleagues, whether they are in-district or outside. McLeskey (2011) found that when teachers collectively worked with other professionals who share similar interests and knowledge, teachers are more apt to reflect together and plan how their new learning can be implemented in classrooms to benefit students. James shared, “I think districts should really encourage their employees to take advantage of PD provided outside of the district.” Sarah discussed this by stating, “It used to be,

you'd just sit there and wait for professional development and have a class and then implement it. Now I can find stuff daily and search for things as I go."

Collective Efficacy. Collective efficacy is the next subtheme discussed within the theme of *collaboration*. Collective efficacy is having a group of professionals with a shared belief that they can impact the success of students. The importance of forming relationships with colleagues was discussed by Sarah as she noted, "The most impactful professional developments for me included connections with other teachers." She added, "I found myself inspired by certain ideas and strategies that other teachers used. Even the attitude and energy some teachers exuded in their classrooms made me want to improve my teaching style, relationships with students, knowledge of the content."

Personalized

The last theme that emerged from the data was that of PD opportunities that are *personalized* or tailored to each teacher's needs. Subthemes include choice, teachers as leaders, reflecting on practice, and increased self-efficacy.

Choice. Teachers having choice in their learning was discussed by study participant Bobbi, with more than 20 years of teaching experience, when she noted that having the "autonomy to make choices and to decide what's best has been very beneficial because there's certain aspects of our classroom with them all being different that we need to focus on." The subtheme of *personalized* PD was also discussed by others including Sarah who said, "Giving more choices and still continuing professional development would be beneficial."

Teachers as Leaders. The next subtheme within the theme of *personalized* PD was teachers as leaders. Annie discussed that she felt more of an investment in PD when existing teacher expertise could be honored". Valerie discussed that her ideal professional development

would “let people recognize what it is they need and give credit for the work they’re doing on their own. I think every staff has a lot of people that could be teaching others that we don’t take advantage of.” Paula had similar thoughts stating, “I think leadership positions and opportunities would be helpful.”

Reflecting on Practice. The next subtheme within the theme of *personalized* was that of reflecting on practice. Participants discussed reflection in different ways. According to Fox et al. (2015), prompted reflections at certain points over time and focused on one’s teaching can yield growth for early career and experienced teachers. Teachers engage in reflection in many ways and many settings. The data from this study showed that reflection has been imperative for professional growth, according to the participants. Bobbi stated that “PD encourages us to continue to grow as learners and look for the best practices that are out there because our students are changing every year.” Bobbi added, “We need to keep up with them and we need to find what’s going to motivate them and engage them in their learning...that’s what professional development continues to do for us moving forward.” Paula also provided thoughts on the value of teachers taking on the role of the learner by stating, “You always have to grow and as a teacher, you’re always the learner and if you don’t embrace that learning, it’s kind of hard to have your students embrace that learning.”

Increased Self-Efficacy. The last subtheme under the theme of *personalized* showcased how PD has increased the self-efficacy of the participants, who indicated the importance of PD and the impact it has on teacher confidence, assisting teachers in examining their strengths and needs, and knowing how those factors help to increase their self-efficacy as teachers. Bobbi spoke about her self-efficacy saying, “to be honest, I think that my growth has been based on my motivation to continue to find PD on my own.” Bobbi who considered both formal and informal

PD said, “Anytime you're learning something from others in different environments, different settings, and situations, it helps you grow as a teacher.” Looking deeper into how PD has impacted her self-efficacy, Bobbi went on to say, “I think reading about what other teachers are doing, you can reflect upon what you're doing and compare and contrast and see what's working best.” Bobbi concluded this thought stating, “If that idea works and you have success, it just does build the confidence and helps your ability to maybe try things a little bit more often go beyond your comfort zone with what you're doing in class.” Sarah shared how PD could have a more significant impact on her efficacy as a teacher stating, “I feel I have progressed where I know what I want to work on and where I want to go, where five years ago or 10 years ago, I would have needed more direction.” Sarah talked more about her self-efficacy stating, “I think that combination of learning more through professional development and implementing it as I teach has definitely made me more confident and comfortable in my abilities as a teacher.” Sarah shared more about how PD has made an impact on her saying, “I know it would probably be hard to separate that from just teaching experience, but it’s hard to imagine that I would have made the same progress without [PD]. I just don’t think I would have.”

The narrative inquiry approach highlighted the rich content in the storied experiences of seven middle school teachers as they reflected on their experiences with PD. Themes were named from commonly used words and phrases that were identified by the researcher and analyzed carefully using the data analysis spiral (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These themes were evident as participants described their experiences with effective PD that was *relevant*, provided *time with colleagues*, allowed for *collaboration*, and was *personalized*.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions were drawn that are intended to inform school and district leaders about professional development:

1. Professional development should include teacher choice so learning is *relevant* to individual teachers, but should also include content/curriculum-specific training as well.
2. Professional development should include *time with colleagues* for teachers to learn, implement, and receive feedback on new learning, as well as *time with colleagues* so teachers can *collaborate* in a variety of groups and settings.
3. Professional development should include *personalized* training that supports teachers as individuals and affords them choice in the process so they are empowered to choose training that will support them in meeting the needs of their students.

Discussion

The work of teaching and learning is ever-evolving, and it can be assumed that PD also needs to continue evolving. Lichtman (2017) suggests that leaders approach teacher learning by being mindful of the same elements, excellence in teaching, and desired learning conditions that are expected for students are also expected when planning for teacher PD. The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to obtain a better understanding of professional development based on teachers' perceptions of their past professional development experiences and how those experiences impacted their professional learning and practice.

Participants pointed out various ways in which PD has impacted their practice, including how PD was *personalized* to their individual needs by providing training on their content and curriculum. *Personalized* learning is defined as an educational approach that varies the learning objectives, instructional methods, content, and assessment methods based on the needs of the

student, with the involvement of the student in selecting content and educational objectives (Virginia Department of Education, 2020). *Personalized* PD focuses on the teacher as the learner, and aims to meet the unique needs of the learner. Based on findings from a study by McLeskey (2011), the use of past experiences, knowledge of what is needed in their classrooms, and the choice of learning styles and materials, teachers taking part in learner-centered PD were able to apply their learning in ways that contributed to improved practice. Similarly, this study found that tailoring or personalizing PD to individual teacher's needs increased the applicability of new learning to their practice. Focusing PD on topics identified by teachers allows new learning to be more personalized.

Personalized learning was the focus of a study by Macias (2017) who sought to determine the effectiveness of professional development when teachers are provided the opportunity to choose the topics and plan and deliver the training. Macias (2017) studied the effectiveness of professional development when teacher leaders were asked to choose the topics, and plan and deliver the training. Following three years of annual teacher-led professional development events, Macias (2017) gathered survey information from participants at the end of years two and three. Forty-five conference participants made up of teachers, parents, and administrators all completed evaluation surveys. The completed surveys indicated that participants enjoyed practical topics, appreciated a neutral and comfortable environment, and benefitted from diverse presenters. According to Macias (2017), findings from the study strongly suggest that a positive environment for professional learning assists in developing teachers into leaders. Findings from this study also support the increased value of PD when learning is presented in a format that fits the needs of the teachers. PD that offers choices for teachers increases the relevancy of the learning and contributes to a positive mindset about PD. Sarah

stated, “My ideal professional development is that everyone would be excited and want to try new things...the attitude is right, the willingness is there, but since we can't control that, I like the idea of letting teachers choose different paths.” This aligns with the study by Macias (2017) which discussed the benefits of teachers having input or choices in their learning. Offering teachers a choice in their PD can lead to positive outcomes such as increased relevancy of the content and increased opportunities for professional growth.

Participants in this study felt that such *personalized* PD increased the relevancy of the learning because topics were directly applicable to each teacher. Participants valued PD that met their needs as individuals, and this was especially evident when participants had choice in their learning. Annie, one of the study participants, offered the following on *personalized* PD, “If it were up to me, we would recognize that teachers are at a different point in their careers and think about what teachers might need. There should be experiences that are tailored to teacher request.” Teacher choice was examined by Schrum and Levin (2013) in their study involving school leaders and teachers from eight exemplary secondary schools in the United States where technology was integrated into teaching using a personalized approach. Findings from Schrum and Levin (2013) suggest that differentiated PD can benefit teachers and students when new learning matches what teachers need and is available when they are ready to learn. This was evident in this study as well, as the benefits of offering teacher choice in PD content led to participants feeling empowered when they were offered an opportunity to have a voice in the planning of PD topics. Motivation and investment in PD increased when the learning fit the needs of participants as individuals, and when participants provided input on their PD. When participants were asked for their opinions and shared their experiences and their expertise as part of *personalized* PD, they described feeling empowered. This was demonstrated by Paula as she

discussed having choice in PD saying, “This is important in my classroom. This is what I’m going to do, this is what I want to learn. If you asked me, what are you interested in, the idea of being asked is huge.”

The findings from this study indicate that personalizing PD in which teachers have choice in their own learning also increases teacher self-efficacy. An increase in a feeling of one’s ability to do their job well is the outcome of increased self-efficacy. Kaniuka (2012) discussed the advancement of professional identities as being a result of professional learning. Participants in this study indicated that they felt more confident in their teaching following opportunities to practice and reflect on training that they were interested in pursuing. Participants discussed their ongoing practice of seeking PD on their own if topics of interest to them were not offered within their own school district. Bobbi spoke to this by saying, “To be honest, I think that my growth has been based on my motivation to continue to find PD on my own.” Bobbi added, “Anytime you’re learning something from others in different environments, different settings, and situations, it helps you grow as a teacher.” Kaniuka (2012) examined how teachers’ expectations of themselves and of their students are connected to efficacy. Findings suggest that increased teacher efficacy is a result of experiences that meet the needs of teachers and students (Kaniuka, 2012). This point was echoed by Sarah when she stated, “I think that combination of learning more through professional development and implementing it as I teach has definitely made me more confident and comfortable in my abilities as a teacher.”

Personalized PD approaches also offer avenues for teachers to continue to grow based on what they already know and can do. According to Minor et al. (2016), professional development can be improved by calibrating teacher learning opportunities to teachers' prior knowledge. In the study by Minor and colleagues, which was composed of fourteen middle school science teachers,

interviews and teacher reflections provided insight into how teacher content knowledge moderates the effect of professional development and how the nature of PD moderates that relationship (Minor et al., 2016). The premise of the study was that teachers learn and do as a result of high-quality content which depends on their prior knowledge. Moreover, teachers' application of content and pedagogy from focused professional development also relates to their prior experience. With professional development that only focused on content knowledge as well as training that focused on content plus pedagogy, teachers tended to implement the PD that fit their needs, depending on their prior content knowledge (Minor et al., 2016). The results of this study suggest that differentiating professional development could be advantageous, as this study shows teachers take away what they are ready to take away from a traditional PD model. According to Minor et al. (2016), PD that is tailored to teachers' needs and prior knowledge holds great promise. According to Polly and Hannafin (2011), true investment in changes to classroom instruction needs to be tied to PD that involves teachers as engaged participants. Teacher engagement in PD leads to increased relevancy in teacher learning. This study also yielded findings that point to the importance of relevancy in teacher PD.

In this study, participants discussed that regardless of the topic, whether it is team-driven, building-identified, or even related to district goals, the need for the topic to be applicable and *relevant* to their practice was paramount. Participants acknowledged that PD can be interesting and can result in learning, but in order for any of the learning to translate from short-term to long-term change in their practice, the content needs to be applicable. In particular, the findings showed that middle school teachers in this study valued PD that incorporated training specific to their content area. Participants in the study discussed content or curriculum-specific PD throughout the findings, making this one of the most prevalent ideas. This was pointed out by

James when he noted that effective training has included “professional development that has been specific to content, and geared toward new standards and how to implement those.” The importance of PD was also made clear by Bobbi who noted that “professional development that I’ve had that affected my teaching the most was when we’ve had the vertical planning or vertical PD with our [content] teachers.” The importance of PD that connects to content was noted in a study by Demonte (2013), who found that effective PD focuses on core content, or content area material, and the modeling of teaching strategies specific to the content. The participants in this study discussed how content PD has had a positive impact on their practice.

The next conclusion from the study was that professional development should include time for teachers to learn, implement, and receive feedback on new learning, as well as time for teachers to collaborate in a variety of groups and settings. Bradley (2014) wrote that leaders who wish to implement change must realize the importance of creating a shared vision and then allow teachers the time to implement learning from the PD. Sarah reflected further on having time to implement new learning stating, “When you try something new and you start completely over, you almost feel like a new teacher and you’re building from scratch.” Paula added to that thought on new learning from PD stating, “When you have time to process, then you can make it applicable to you.”

In addition to having time to implement new learning, receiving feedback and collaborating with other teachers was a key component of effective PD identified by the participants in this study. They also discussed the need for PD to incorporate more use of *collaboration*, using colleagues as resources, and tapping into and recognizing the expertise that exists within districts. Robinson et al. (2014) suggest that fostering more opportunities for teachers to have sustained dialogue and collaboration across classrooms and grade levels about

instructional techniques and assessment could impact student learning. This concept was discussed by James when he offered, “I think in general, if the professional development allows more discussion, usually in smaller groups, I think that is always pretty meaningful.” James stated, “Teachers tend to be a little bit more honest and vulnerable...and I think at those times that's really when your self-efficacy is going to improve.”

Another strategy for *collaboration* evident in the data was that of making connections with teachers inside and outside of one's district. James expanded on this by stating, “I think districts should really encourage their employees to take advantage of PD provided outside of the district.” James added, “It seems like the shift has been from...whole district professional development to more individual choice.” James went on to note, “it seems like there's been more [PD] opportunities especially as things have gone virtual, and I hope that we can do stuff at the state and even at a national level.” He described a possible scenario with professionals from across the country that may encompass, “talking with middle school teachers or maybe specifically [his content] teachers throughout the country and there's visual format would be really powerful.”

PD can support teachers not only as individuals but collectively. Annie demonstrated this point by stating that she needs PD to provide “time with colleagues to process things that are changing that we might need to address.” An increase in collective efficacy shows yet another benefit to making time for teachers to collaborate on a regular basis. Having these opportunities can help in leveraging professional networks through regular *collaboration*. Stewart (2014) found that PD efforts are maximized when teachers work together toward a common goal. Forming relationships with colleagues inspires *collaboration* and creates intentional opportunities to learn from one another.

The findings from this study revealed that in addition to personalizing PD on content and pedagogy-related training, teachers have a desire to know more about how to reach their students as people first and as students second. Even though this was an unexpected finding, it speaks to the importance of personalizing PD to support teachers in choosing training that helps them know how to meet the needs of their students. Study participants expressed a need to recognize the importance of meeting students' emotional needs before prioritizing academics. Participants were greatly concerned with student well-being beyond academics. The participants provided a great deal of data that related to the need for teachers to be able to have learning that assisted them with creating a classroom of caring and that of meeting the students where they are as people first, and as students second. Valerie offered that her students have benefitted from PD that "helped me reach the deep souls of my students, how to help them be better, emotionally, socially, physically, and all those things that are needed before they can learn." Responses that led to this conclusion encompassed the need for training tailored to teachers' learning how to reach students as individuals and to meet their needs, which would ultimately have an impact on their academic success. The importance of knowing students was discussed by Bobbi who offered, "Family life is changing all the time in our country, in our communities. The kids are changing with technology and socially." Bobbi spoke to the need to evolve along with this knowledge stating, "Sometimes you can get complacent with that. And I think sometimes that's a problem with teaching and teachers that we can get so complacent that we forget we have to change too and adapt." Bobbi discussed this further saying, "We need to start with the question what do our kids need. And once we start with that question with our kids' needs, our school or community, I think we're going to have a greater impact." With over 20 years in the classroom, Valerie added powerful thoughts stating, "I think as I have more experience, I need less about

my standards, my curriculum, I need more on how to help the different students who come into my room.” Valerie went on to talk more about meeting the needs of her students adding, “The life stories of some of our students, we can't even imagine. As a teacher, I need to serve those from different economics, different diversity, and trauma. I would like more on that to help me in the classroom.” Knowing students as individuals means knowing what factors may impact their learning, and identifying relevant interventions. This was demonstrated by Annie who reflected on the importance of forming relationships with her students stating, “In my practice with students and their learning, the best thing I did was get a middle-level educator’s certificate. That set me on the right foot to understand middle school students in their uniqueness.” She added to that thought by saying that she is “drawn toward experiences that help individualize the experience for kids in my classroom.” Bobbi shared that her recent PD hasn’t “necessarily been student-centered.” She discussed that PD is often “more of the curriculum and there’s nothing wrong with that, but that doesn’t necessarily directly impact the student.” Bobbi reflected on the benefit of past PD that “was able to teach you how to interact with kids and challenging situations.” Meeting the individual needs of students was a strong takeaway demonstrating a need for training that is *personalized* and tailored to the learning needs of teachers.

The effectiveness of PD should be evidenced by improved teacher practice. Through analyzing the strategies historically practiced to fulfill teachers’ professional needs, as well as examining teachers’ stories about their experiences with PD, this study aimed to uncover aspects of PD that have been effective for middle school teachers in one small school in an upper Midwestern state. The study findings indicate that several components of PD have been impactful to the participants’ teaching including allowing time to implement new learning,

asking teachers to identify their own learning needs, providing regular and multiple avenues for teacher collaboration, and ensuring that PD is relevant to the needs of teachers and students.

School and district leaders take great care in planning professional development for teachers that meets the needs of the district, school, teachers, and students. Findings from this study offer ideas and support to school and district leaders that may cause them to analyze their current PD programs through the lens of the teachers in their organization. This study suggests that the structure for planning and implementing professional development may be improved by seeking the input of practicing teachers and asking them to provide their insights into what has been effective for them in the past. PD that is planned by school and district leaders could see the most positive results by involving teachers in the process and then by carefully planning PD that meets their needs as individual professionals.

Recommendations for Practice

The findings from the study led to the following recommendations for practice:

- District and school leaders should ensure that teachers play an active role in planning, delivering, and reflecting on PD, including content/curriculum-specific PD and PD that meets the individual learning needs of teachers. This should involve intentional and sustained methods for seeking and understanding teacher's training needs. This information could be gathered systemically, utilizing online surveys or services that provide rich, detailed, yet instant feedback on how PD aligns with teacher needs.
- District and school leaders should implement consistent practices for teachers that include allowing time to process, implement, and seek feedback on new learning as well as time to allow teachers to collaborate in various groups and settings to process new learning. This could be accomplished within the parameters of scheduled PD days as well

as throughout the year. The results of this study indicate that it would be advantageous to intentionally build in regular time for *collaboration* and to incorporate feedback into these collaborative conversations.

- District and school leaders should implement supportive and encouraging PD for teachers that is *personalized* and tailored to assist them in learning strategies to not only meet the diverse academic needs of their students but their varying emotional needs as well.
- District and school leaders may wish to consider a multi-tiered approach to PD which takes the findings, conclusions, and recommendations of this study into account. This may include dividing the total time allotted within a teaching contract among state/district initiatives, building/grade-level/content area topics, and balancing those with chunks of time in which teachers can fill in their own PD based on their learning needs. This comprehensive approach could emulate a post-secondary course catalog, with many of the total sessions being core to the program, but offering what would be similar to *electives* as *personalized* sessions. The element of time could be carefully added into the implementation of the comprehensive program and throughout a school year. A structure that includes teachers' voices would be strong among all of these areas and would be beneficial for teacher learning.

Recommendations for Further Study

The findings from the study led to the following recommendations for further study:

1. This study was limited to middle school teachers in a rural district in the upper Midwest. Future studies could include teachers from all K-12 levels. This could provide a more comprehensive picture of teachers' perceptions of PD programs which may lead to increased PD effectiveness.

2. This study was limited to one middle school with an enrollment of 441 students. Future studies could include teachers from both smaller and larger schools and then the data could be compared between the different settings.
3. This study was completed using a qualitative approach, specifically the narrative inquiry method of research. Future studies could employ a quantitative approach to gain insights from teachers.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewee:

Position held by Interviewee:

Introduction: Tell me a little bit about yourself. What do you teach? How long have you taught?

1. Describe your experiences with professional development.
2. How has learning from professional development in the past led to changes in your practice?
3. Based on your experiences with professional development, what has been beneficial to your students' learning?
4. Describe your growth as a teacher based on your experience with professional development.
5. Based on your professional development experiences, how would you design an ideal professional development?
6. Describe your involvement with professional development.
7. Based on your experiences, how would you like to be involved in professional development?
8. How do you feel about your growth as a teacher based on your experience with professional development?

9. Based on your professional development experiences, what do you feel you need individually from professional learning?
10. How has learning from professional development impacted the success and the academic growth of your students?

Appendix B

Written Reflective Questions

Please take a few moments to reflect on the first interview and feel free to share additional thoughts on professional development that you wish to share with the researcher.

One area that was discussed in the interview was reflection. Diving further into that topic, please respond in writing to the following questions:

1) How has your experience with professional development led to changes in your classroom?

2) How has your experience with professional development led to inaction in your classroom?

3) What experiences with professional development drove you to change your teaching?

Appendix C

Follow-Up Interview

Time of Follow-Up Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Position held by Interviewee:

Items:

1. How have your experiences with professional development shaped your perception regarding future professional development?
2. How has professional development impacted your self-efficacy as a teacher?
3. How could professional development have a more significant impact on your self-efficacy as a teacher?
4. How could professional development have a more significant impact on student success?